The Aztec: The Last Great Civilization of Mesoamerica

Duncan Ryan

VISIT...

The AZTEC

The Last Great Civilization of Mesoamerica

Duncan Ryan

The Aztec

The Last Great Civilization of Mesoamerica

by Duncan Ryan

Introduction

Among the many native groups that built great societies and civilizations in the New World, there are three that stand out as the most remarkable and most powerful. The first of these, the Maya, dominated Mexico and Central America for centuries before declining for various reasons in the early part of the 1st millennium CE. The second, the powerful Inca Empire, controlled a vast territory throughout parts of South America, establishing a great civilization in the Andes. The third, and probably best-known of these New World civilizations, were the Aztec, a group of tribes residing in modern-day

Mexico that built one of the most impressive empires in the Americas before the arrival of the European peoples.

Without any doubt, the Aztec have remained in the popular mind as one of the most influential societies ever to have arisen in the Americas. Their ruins, archaeological remains and the written legacy preserved by the Spaniards who systematically destroyed them have left us an incredible picture of this New World civilization that rivaled or surpassed many that the Old World had produced. Over the past several centuries, the work of thousands of scholars and archaeologists has cumulatively given us a clear and precise view into the world and life of the Aztec, both before and after their conquest by European invaders.

This short work will attempt to present the history and culture of the Aztec civilization in a manner that is accessible to those readers who do not already have a specialized knowledge of either the Aztecs in particular or of Mesoamerican history in general. Though it will largely take the form of a general overview of Aztec history, it will also endeavor to be thorough, presenting the reader with as detailed and specific a study of the history of this remarkable civilization as is possible within a short history. In doing so, this short work is also intended to act as a framework upon which future learning may be built by the readers who choose to make a more in-depth study of the Aztec peoples and their culture.

Section One

The Origin of the Aztec People

In ancient and classical times, Mesoamerica was a region of the globe diversely inhabited by many different groups of people, many of which had established great societies and civilizations for themselves long before the Aztecs began their ascent to power. As such, tracking the exact origins of the Aztec peoples from their early origins is a task that has presented much difficulty to modern scholars. Further complicating this already difficult problem is the fact that the Aztecs, like many ancient peoples, had their own complex mythology about their origins. Like most origin myths of civilizations around the globe, it is almost certain that the mythological origin of the Aztecs is partly legend and partly real history.

The primary tribe that has come to be known as the Aztec was in reality known to itself as the Mexica, from which the modern name of the country of Mexico is derived. This is the tribe that founded the city of Tenochtitlan, which would eventually become the capital of the Aztec Empire. Due to their status as the predominant Aztec group at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, the Mexica are the source from which most of the accounts of the Aztec origin myth were

recorded. However, it seems certain that other groups that were ethnically connected to the Mexica and spoke the same language, Nahuatl, had a fairly similar origin mythos.

The starting point of the Aztec origin myth is a place known to the Mexica as Chicomoztoc, a place from which they emerged from one of seven caves, each of which was the place of origin for one of the great Nahuatl-speaking tribal lineages of Mesoamerica. Interestingly, this mythological concept is common to many different groups of Central America and even the southwestern United States. As such, it is probable that this myth dates back to very ancient groups in the region that probably developed over time into the more familiar tribal groups in this part of the world. Chicomoztoc, however, was only the first stage of the supposed history of the Mexica before they migrated into their historically known territory and established themselves as a major regional power.

Following their emergence from Chicomoztoc, the Mexica believed that they resided in yet another mythological or semi-mythological place known as Aztlan. Unlike Chicomoztoc, which is probably a purely mythical allegory for the divergence of the various tribes as a means of explaining their existence, it is probable that Aztlan represents a real place that the Mexica lived prior to migrating into their eventual dwelling place and founding Tenochtitlan. In Aztlan, some surviving accounts suggest that the Mexica found themselves living in oppressive conditions under the rule of an enigmatic group

called the *Azteca,* literally meaning “people of Aztlan.” Interestingly, this is the name that would eventually be applied to the Mexica, though they themselves would have known the word Aztec only in this mythological (and rather negative) context. The tyrannical rule of the *Azteca* would eventually lead the Mexica to leave Aztlan, beginning their journey to the future site of Tenochtitlan. How much of the story of Aztlan is true remains very uncertain, but the Aztec are generally believed to have migrated south into the region they came to occupy. This means that if Aztlan represents a place grounded in any objective historical reality, its location was probably either in what is today the northern regions of Mexico or possibly in the extreme southwest of the United States.

Linguistic evidence confirms at least some parts of this migration myth. Nahuatl, the language that was spoken by the Mexica, was also spoken by many other groups that migrated into central Mexico and is part of a broader family of languages known as the Uto-Aztecan group. These languages are thought to have originated from a common proto-language root that was spoken in northern Mexico and/or the southwestern United States in prehistory before spreading throughout large parts of both countries through migrations, eventually diverging into many inter-related languages. The Nahuatl language itself seems to have begun to enter central Mexico beginning in about 500 BCE, when a general migration of groups that spoke it began migrating south. Given the traditional dating of the Aztec migration from Aztlan into central Mexico, it is likely that the Mexica

were among the last Nahuatl-speaking groups to make this migratory journey.

With the leaving of Aztlan, the Mexica are said to have wandered in search of a sign that would inform them of where they should establish themselves. These wanderings would lead them south to the Valley of Mexico and the shores of Lake Texcoco, where they would establish a more permanent occupation (discussed more thoroughly in the next section). Eventually, the site of Tenochtitlan was chosen when, according to legend, the wandering Mexica sighted an eagle devouring a snake while sitting on a cactus, a sign they had supposedly been informed they would see by their patron god Huitzilopochtli upon leaving Atzlan. Though this account is almost certainly mythological in nature, it was a key facet of the semi-mythological history of the Mexica as a people, as it was this sign that supposedly led to the establishment of what would become one of the greatest cities of the New World and, in time, the capital of the Aztec Empire.

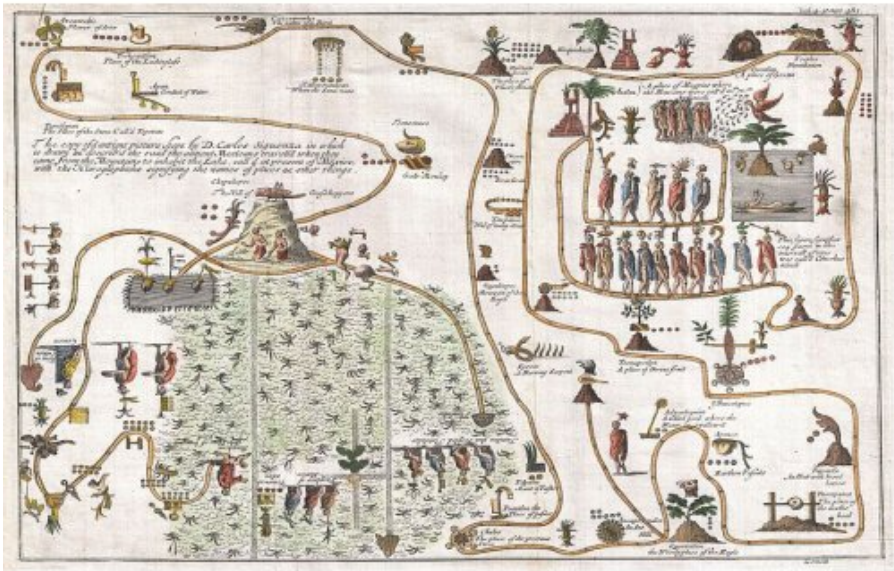

Illustration 1: An early 18th century map loosely representing the migration of the Aztecs from Aztlan until their arrival at Chapultepec

As has been previously stated, there is much doubt as to how much of this history is grounded in real historical events and how much of it was purely myth. However, there are some objective historical conclusions that can be made from the condition of Mexico in the time contemporary and prior to the arrival of the Mexica in the Valley of Mexico. Precise dating on this event is impossible, but there is a general consensus that Tenochtitlan was probably established sometime in the 14th century CE. Surviving accounts of the Aztlan myth suggest that the migration of the Mexica away from their homeland occurred sometime in or around the 11th century CE.

It is known that central Mexico was far from uninhabited or even without major civilizations before the Mexica arrived there. Of those

peoples who dominated the region before the Aztec would establish their power, the most influential was without any serious doubt the Toltec people, a group that held power over much of Mexico in the 10th through 12th centuries CE. Though far less well-known than the Aztec, the Toltec created a complex civilization that would go on to become the template for the Aztecs. The Toltecs, are classified in the context of Mesoamerican history as representing the early years of the Postclassic Period, an era beginning in about 1000 CE, when many of the city-states and peoples that had dominated Central America up to that point either collapsed entirely or went into a declining period. The Aztec, too, represent the Postclassic Period, but are representative of a later part of it.

In art, architecture and other cultural aspects, there seems to have been a great degree of Toltec influence on the Aztec. Indeed, the Toltecs even seem to have established an empire of their own which ruled over large portions of central Mexico and conducted trade throughout Mesoamerica and the American southwest. This empire drove the rise of the Toltec capital city, Tula, to a position of extreme regional power and prominence during the height of the Toltec era of Mesoamerican history. The city, which features palace complexes, large pyramids and several amazingly intricate statues placed in public terraces, would have almost certainly served as an inspiration for the Aztec in creating the city of Tenochtitlan, especially given the fact that there is known to have been a Toltec presence in the Valley of Mexico prior to the ascent of the Aztec Empire.

This Toltec influence is heavily evidenced in the fact that the word "Toltec" itself comes from the word the Aztec used to describe not only their predecessors as the dominant power in Mexico but also any wise teacher or sage. This has led some scholars to the conclusion that the word did not describe any one particular tribe to the Aztecs, but instead was applied to any advanced and civilized group of peoples who had created large urban settlements for themselves. While this theory has gained some traction in the mainstream historical community, the archaeological evidence for a large empire centered at Tula would seem to bear out the conclusion that the Toltec were a real tribe that exerted power over Mexico prior to the establishment of Aztec dominance.

The Toltec, however, were not the only great Mesoamerican power whose lingering legacy would have been encountered by the Aztec. Prior to the establishment of the Toltec Empire, Mexico appears to have been dominated by yet another great civilization, this one reaching its zenith during the Classical Period of Mesoamerican history. This particular civilization is extremely enigmatic, but left a massive reminder of its existence and power only about 30 miles away from the site that would become Tenochtitlan. This reminder is the massive and mysterious city known as Teotihuacan.

Teotihuacan is, without a doubt, one of the most intriguing archaeological sites in the Americas. The site is a truly massive city,

containing many pyramids and other large public areas. It was, at its height, almost certainly the largest city in the New World in terms of its population, which some estimates suggest may have been in excess of 150,000 permanent citizens. Archaeological findings at the site have also shown that the people who founded and built Teotihuacan had achieved a very high level of civilization, as the art and crafted goods found there are among the best quality of any from their era. However, for all of this grandeur, Teotihuacan remains a historical mystery. The people who created it are completely unknown, and no satisfactory explanation has ever been found for what appears to have been the sudden decline of the city after large parts of it were systematically burned in the middle of the 6th century CE. Several theories, including an uprising due to the food shortages associated with a climactic shift known to have occurred around the same time, have been put forward. However, since no written records have ever been found at Teotihuacan, these hypotheses remain informed speculation, while the site itself and the people who constructed and ruled it remain enigmatic.

Though the Toltec and the people of Teotihuacan were far from the only great civilizations to have existed in Mexico up to that point, they were the two that the Aztec would have been the most familiar with when entering the Valley of Mexico. The Aztec peoples would have certainly had direct contact with the Toltecs, and the nearby site of Teotihuacan would have served as an inspiration for the great city they were about to construct (although, in truth, the Aztec did not

differentiate between the two, as they believed Teotihuacan to have been an early Toltec city). In other parts of Mexico, the remaining kingdoms of the ancient Maya civilization, which had by this time passed its height, were still in existence. Throughout the entirety of Mesoamerica, the influence of the ancient Olmec civilization, the earliest of the known advanced civilizations of Central America which had flourished in the 1st millennium BCE, had spread to create many similarities between the various great civilizations that had followed it. Such were the political and cultural conditions into which the Aztec would have entered upon the end of their migration into the Valley of Mexico.

Section Two

Early Aztec History: The Establishment and Growth of Tenochtitlan

When the Aztec arrived in the Valley of Mexico, they were not already the great and powerful civilization that they would go on to become. Instead, they were probably a displaced tribe with a limited population and few available resources entering into an area where other peoples had already successfully established themselves. As

such, the Aztec (for this is how we will address the Mexica from this point forward unless otherwise specially noted) would have a long journey ahead of them in founding their capital and making themselves the regional superpower that they would go on to become.

The early years of the Aztec presence in the Valley of Mexico, like much of their history prior to the migration there, appears to be partially mythological. However, there is almost certainly more truth here than in the pre-migration accounts, as these accounts represent a time much closer to the height of Aztec civilization. These accounts suggest that, at first, the Aztec inhabited a set of ruins somewhere in the Valley of Mexico, quite possibly Teotihuacan itself. This would not be an entirely unlikely possibility, as there are many comparable instances in history in which nomadic or displaced groups of people have made use of abandoned cities. For whatever reason, however, the Aztec would not remain in these ruins, and instead would make their way to Lake Texcoco, very near where Tenochtitlan would be founded.

Before establishing their future capital city, however, the Aztec would spend another period of time moving from place to place around the shores of the lake. At first, they are believed to have settled on a hill which was rich in natural springs, a place they called Chapultepec. Whether or not this part of the history is objectively true is difficult to say, but much like the possibility of their time in a ruined city, the story itself makes sense from a historical perspective.

Being a weaker tribe surrounded by more established groups of peoples inhabiting the Texcoco area, the Aztec would have done well to look for a place that they could easily defend, such as a natural hill. Having easy access to water from the springs would also have benefited them, as an enemy tribe could not have cut off their water supply by simply surrounding the hill. This was especially important in the vicinity of Lake Texcoco, which was a brackish (partially salty) body of water. As such, Chapultepec as it is described in surviving historical accounts would have been a relatively good place for the Aztec to establish themselves initially, although some accounts suggest that the hill was a poor place for agriculture. Though the date of the supposed settlement in Chapultepec is not known precisely, it was most likely sometime in the early to mid 13th century CE.

Whether it was a part of the decision to settle at Chapultepec or not, the choice of the hill as a first settlement in the valley was another element that somewhat linked the Aztec to their Toltec predecessors. During the last days of the Toltec Empire, the Toltec capital had been shifted away from the historic center of Tula by the group's last major ruler, Huemac. The move had been made due to the sudden raid and burning of Tula at the hands of roaming groups of nomads called the Chichimec. According to later Aztec historical accounts, Huemac and a group of his remaining loyal subjects resettled at Chapultepec, where the last great king of the Toltec died sometime early in the 12th century.

During their time in Chapultepec, the Aztec would have found themselves under the hegemonic rule of the Tepanec tribe, who inhabited the nearby city of Azcapotzalco. For a time, the Aztec lived peacefully under this arrangement, though they were forced to make tributary payments to the Tepanec. However, this period of stability in Chapultepec would not last for long. In the late years of the 13th century, they were apparently driven out of Chapultepec and afterward were allowed to settle in a place called Tizapan, a barren area that was under the control of another nearby tribe, the Culhua, who may have been descendants of the Toltecs. Tizapan, though certainly inhospitable, would give the Aztec yet another place in which to live. Having by this time developed advanced agricultural techniques, the Aztec were capable of practicing subsistence level living in Tizapan. Precisely where these agricultural techniques came from is unknown, but it is likely that the Aztecs' time in whatever ruined city they briefly inhabited followed by their contact with both the Tepanec and the Culhua had allowed them to absorb a growing set of important skills that would serve them well in establishing themselves as a great civilization.

The time in Tizapan would come to an end in the 1320s CE (probably 1323, but this date may not be accurate). According to Aztec historical legend, which as always should be treated as only a tentative history, the Culhua attacked them in Tizapan and forced them out after they had made a human sacrifice of a Culhua princess. Though this section of the story is probably apocryphal, surviving

accounts suggest that an Aztec priest appeared wearing the skin of the princess at a religious festival, where the Culhua king, Achicometl, saw what had become of his daughter. Though human sacrifice was far from an uncommon occurrence among the various tribes of Mesoamerica and had been practiced for millennia, the incident is said to have sparked a war between the enraged Culhua and the Aztec. The resulting war once again displaced the Aztec, leaving them in search of yet another site for potential settlement.

For two years after their expulsion from Tizapan, the Aztec continued to wander the Texcoco area, probably living a nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle while looking for a suitable place to establish their new settlement. In 1325 CE, however, they would settle in the place that would eventually become Tenochtitlan, a small island near the shores of the lake and close to the hill of Chapultepec where they had originally made their home. When they first encountered it, the island would likely have been an inhospitable place in which to build a city. Separated from the mainland and consisting mostly of a marshy wetland, the island would have presented many logistical difficulties to the early Aztecs who began the building of Tenochtitlan. While living in the Texcoco area, however, the Aztecs had learned much from the other tribes and by this time had the technical and engineering capability to overcome the challenges presented by the island while simultaneously harnessing its natural advantages.

In order to make the island more usable, the Aztec created

chinampas, which were fields or other areas of land built up by mounding soil up into artificial islands rising out of lakes. This method, though it would certainly have required much labor to transport the soil needed to create the islands, was a remarkably effective way to increase the amount of land on which agricultural activities could be conducted. The Aztec very likely adopted this construction technique from neighboring tribes in the region, as *chinampas* are known to have been in use at other lakes in the Valley of Mexico during the time in which the Aztec would have either been migrating or settled at Chapultepec. With the building of several *chinampas*, Tenochtitlan grew from a small island into a much larger one that was more viable for large-scale settlement. This type of expansion would continue throughout the arc of Aztec history, allowing the city to grow to meet the needs of a larger population.

Illustration 2: 1912 image of Mexican farmers cultivating corn in chinampas separated by irrigation canals. This method is likely almost identical to those used by the Aztec for growing crops.

With Tenochtitlan established, the Aztec at last had a permanent settlement from which they could conduct trade and diplomatic relations with the neighboring tribes as equals, rather than as subjects. This transition from tributaries of tribes such as the Tepanec and the Culhua to a fully independent tribe in their own right marked the first stage of the rise of the Aztecs toward the great power that they would soon become. With their semi-nomadic lifestyle ended, the Aztec

people settled into a more urban means of living. Soon, this phenomenon would result in the construction of a second city just outside of Tenochtitlan. This second city, named Tlatelolco, would also prove to be vital to the Aztec, as it would become the center of most trade occurring in the Texcoco basin. With their two island cities established, the Aztec were well on their way to the creation of a great civilization. However, as with the establishment of many of history's greatest empires, the journey toward the creation of the Aztec Empire would include several setbacks for the Aztec.

Aztec historical accounts suggest that the ruler of the tribe at the time when Tenochtitlan was founded was an enigmatic figure named Tenoch, for whom the city seems to have been named. Much debate has occurred among historians as to whether Tenoch was a real figure of Aztec history, a mythological ruler or some combination of the two. More than likely, Tenoch represents a real founder of the city of Tenochtitlan to whom certain mythological aspects have been attributed. Tenoch appears to have been the first person to whom the Aztec gave the title of *tlatoani*, a title which translates literally from the Nahuatl language as “speaker” but which is believed to have had an implied meaning more along the lines of “speaker of the people,” or a person who represented the people under his rule. As such, Tenoch may be viewed as the first person to have truly been the king of the Mexica tribe of the Aztec tribal group during its urbanized period.

Much like his existence and history, the regnal period of Tenoch is open to much question and discussion. The classical Aztec histories later recorded by Spanish explorers and conquerors would have it that Tenochtitlan was founded under the rule of Tenoch in 1325 CE. His death, however, is dated at 1375 CE. Though such a long rule is far from impossible, it would have made Tenoch the longest ruling of the Aztec *tlatoani* at 50 years of reign. There are several possible explanations of such an anomalously long rule. The first is that the regnal period of Tenoch is exaggerated, possibly as one of the mythological additions to his history. The second is that Tenoch is a historical composite figure, possibly an amalgamation of the first two or even three kings who ruled Tenochtitlan. It is even possible that the Aztec incorrectly reported the year in which Tenochtitlan was founded (though due to their usual precision in dating, this explanation seems unlikely), meaning that the rule of Tenoch began later than the standard Aztec chronology suggests. Finally, it should be stated that there is no inherent reason that the dating of the rule of Tenoch could not be entirely accurate. A reign of 50 years would merely make him unusual, not impossible.

Illustration 3: Tenoch, as depicted in an early colonial period codex.

It would also be during the reign of the enigmatic Tenoch that construction would begin on what was to become the single most influential building in all of Mesoamerica by the time the Aztec Empire reached its height. This building was the central temple of Tenochtitlan, which would come to be called the Templo Mayor. Thus far, archaeological remains of this earliest stage of the temple have not been found, and indeed may not even still be extant. Extrapolating from smaller temples created by Nahua peoples and the other groups that populated Mesoamerica at the time, however, it is likely that the original Templo Mayor was little more than a small step pyramid with

a flat platform on top of it. At the top of the pyramid would have been where the Aztec priests would have conducted rites and sacrifices, likely in an enclosed or partially enclosed wooden shrine. Later versions of the Templo Mayor would feature shrines to two Aztec gods, Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. Since these two gods were consistently considered the two most important of the Aztec pantheon, it is likely, but not certain, that the original Templo Mayor would also have featured a small shrine to each or otherwise shared a single smaller shrine for the combined worship of the two.

Following the time of Tenoch, in which the Aztecs had experienced both independence and prosperity, there would come a period in which they would briefly return to their previous positions as subsidiaries to more powerful regional tribes. The first stage of this process would begin almost immediately after the alleged death of Tenoch in 1375. A succession crisis apparently occurred, forcing the Aztec to look to outside influences to provide them with a suitable ruler. The solution, unusually, would come in the form of Acamapichtli, a noble with direct ties to the royal family of Culhuacan, the city-state that had only half a century before driven the Aztec from their lands following the incident of the sacrifice of the king's daughter. Though there must almost certainly have still been a great deal of enmity between the two groups, there were also strong ties that had been formed during the time of the Culhua rule over the Aztecs. During that time period, the noble families of the two tribes had practiced limited intermarriage, producing several high-ranking

members of society that were mixtures of the two noble bloodlines. Acamapichtli is one example of such a mixed noble heritage. To the Aztecs, his reign would also have been particularly acceptable because of the supposed bloodlines of the rulers of Culhuacan, which were believed to have begun with the last members of the Toltec nobility after they had migrated away from Tula to Chapultepec and then finally to Culhuacan. Because of the Aztec admiration and respect for the Toltec civilization which had preceded them, a nobleman bearing Toltec heritage along with descent from a noble Aztec family would have been welcomed as a potentially great leader.

The early reign of Acamapichtli was largely geared toward cementing the new ruler's ties to Tenochtitlan. Although he was very likely seen as a good choice for *tlatoani*, there still would have been a need for him to secure his position within the city, being that he was not a native of it. However, even as the ruler from Culhuacan worked to legitimize his reign in Tenochtitlan, the Aztec city of Tlatelolco would also import a new ruler. In this case, the ruler would not be of Culhua descent, but instead of Tepanec heritage. This would create a great deal of political tension within the two Aztec cities, especially given the fact that the Tepanec were soon to rise to an extreme degree of political power and prominence.

Over time, the Aztec would find themselves drawn more and more into the political and military alliance of the Tepanec, who at this time were ruled by a king named Tezozomoc. This king, according to

the histories compiled by the Spanish after their contact with the Aztec and other local tribes, was almost single-handedly responsible for leading the Tepanec from being a fairly influential power within the Valley of Mexico to essentially establishing hegemonic rule over the valley and most of the surrounding inhabited areas. This expansion of the Tepanec, though it would yet again bring the Aztec under the almost complete control of another tribe, would allow them to participate in many military campaigns, learning the arts of war that would eventually allow them to become the greatest power in their region.

At first, the Aztec probably fought as mercenaries or specialized conscripts in the Tepanec army. In this capacity, they would come into conflict with the city-state of Texcoco, from which the lake on which Tenochtitlan was built takes its name. Texcoco, however, would one day become a strong ally of the Aztec, forming part of what is known as the Triple Alliance (discussed in more detail in the next section). Although the Aztec would act in this martial capacity in the armies of Tezozomoc, Acamapichtli would attempt to keep the peace between the tribe he ruled and the others as much as possible during this period. Particularly important to the survival and success of Tenochtitlan during this time was the proper payment of tributes to the Tepanec ruler, who by all accounts required heavy and frequent tributary payments from all cities under his rule.

Illustration 4: The Tepacec ruler Tezozomoc, the most influential ruler in the Valley of Mexico immediately prior to the Aztec rise to dominance.

Though Acamapichtli would do his best to keep peace with Tezozomoc despite the powerful ruler's hefty demands, the Tepanec king would long outlive his subject in Tenochtitlan. Indeed, Tezozomoc would rule from 1370 CE until 1426 CE. This extremely long reign has led to historical descriptions of the old king as an incredibly ancient man, probably declining into limited effectiveness in his extreme dotage, not unlike the Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II. Be that as it may, there can be little doubt that throughout the late 14th and early 15th centuries CE, Tezozomoc was by far the most influential ruler in the Valley of Mexico and that his rule would greatly shape the course of Aztec history.

Acamapichtli would also begin construction on another phase of the Templo Mayor, a major expansion of the presumed original temple that would continue through the reigns of his two immediate successors. This level, the first for which extant archaeological evidence has so far been found, would be a project that would last until 1427, creating a temple that would be the spiritual center of an ever-growing empire. Though this second phase of construction would be far from the last version of the Templo Mayor, it would be the one that turned it from the probable small, local temple created when Tenochtitlan was first founded into a great religious center of a powerful state.

Acamapichtli would rule until his death in 1395. This time, however, the royal succession would follow a hereditary path, with rule being passed on to Acamapichtli's son Huitzilihuitl on January 22nd, 1396. The reign of Huitzilihuitl would prove to be a period of great prosperity for the Aztec, as he would continue to establish productive relations with the tribes that surrounded Tenochtitlan. In particular, Huitzilihuitl would bring the Aztec royal bloodline into a closer relationship with Tezozomoc, who was still the dominant king of the region. This was accomplished by means of a marriage between Huitzilihuitl and Ayauhcihuatl, Tezozomoc's own daughter. With this marriage, relations between the Aztec and their Tepanec rulers became more more equal, with significant preference shown to the city of Tenochtitlan in political and military endeavors, as well as in the form of a substantial reduction of tributary payments.

This closer alliance with Tezozomoc, however, did come with certain caveats. Among these was an implied obligation for the Aztec to support the Tepanec in wars, even if the conflict did not specifically concern the Aztecs. Such an event occurred in 1416, when the king of Texcoco went to war with the Tepanec. Indeed, under other circumstances, Huitzilihuitl would probably have sided with Texcoco, given that he had married one of his daughters to its recently coronated king. However, given the sheer power and influence of the Tepanec and of Tezozomoc personally, it would obviously have been far more important for Huitzilihuitl to retain good relations with them. This fact would work to the advantage of the Aztecs, who were tasked with attacking several city-states that were allied to Texcoco. This string of conquests not only continued to sharpen the military skills of the Aztec, but also allowed them to gain much in material wealth from the sacking of the cities.

In 1417, Huitzilihuitl died, passing rule of the Aztec of Tenochtitlan on to his son, Chimalpopoca. As the offspring of Huitzilihuitl and the daughter of Tezozomoc, Chimalpopoca was the grandson of the Tepanec king, further strengthening the already close ties between the two tribes. When the war with Texcoco, which was ongoing in the early reign of Chimalpopoca, was concluded, the city-state was placed under the direct control of Tenochtitlan, further increasing the growing wealth and power that the Aztec had gained from their long and mutually beneficial association with the Tepanec. However, in the

years 1426 and 1427, changes would occur that would forever alter the political dynamics within the Valley of Mexico. The first event, occurring in 1426, was the death of the incredibly aged Tezozomoc at the end of what is recorded as a reign of between 56 and 59 years. The death of the Tepanec king, by far the most powerful individual person in the region and a consistent stabilizing force for over half a century, would have been nearly earthshaking in its political importance. Tezozomoc, having essentially built the Tepanec sphere of influence through his own sheer military and political abilities, did not leave behind a Tepanec tribe that was capable of maintaining the position of power he had achieved and held for so long. With the death of the venerable and almost universally respected king, the Valley of Mexico would find itself as the center of a power vacuum.

The death of Tezozomoc would, in a roundabout way, lead to the death of his grandson Chimalpopoca as well. Initially, Tezozomoc was succeeded by his own son, Tayatzin, who was supported in his claim to the throne by Chimalpopoca. However, Tayatzin would rule only briefly, as he was soon replaced by a coup led by his brother Maxtla. Because of the close ties between the ousted Tayatzin and Chimalpopoca, relations between the Aztec and the Tepanec rapidly deteriorated into enmity. Eventually, an all out war between the two cities became inevitable, resulting in the capture of Chimalpopoca, who was returned to the Tepanec capital of Azcapotzalco, where he is recorded to have eventually committed suicide in captivity.

With the relations between the long-stable Tepanec tribe under Tezozomoc and the Aztec broken, the stage was now set for the series of events that would propel Tenochtitlan to the center of power and prominence and the Aztecs to the role of rulers of an empire. The Tepanec, one of the earliest tribes that the Mexica had encountered upon first entering the Valley of Mexico after their migration, would now be faced with a powerful enemy in the form of a populous, wealthy and militarily proficient Tenochtitlan that they had helped to create.

Section Three

The Aztec Empire

The dynasty of Tenochtitlan founded by Acamapichtli did not come to an end with the unexpected capture and death of Chimalpopoca. In June of 1427, a new *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan, named Itzcoatl, was elected. Itzcoatl, however, was not the son of his immediate predecessor, but a son of Acamapichtli who had been passed over for the throne in favor of Huitzilihuitl after the death of the dynastic founder. This also made him an uncle to the late Chimalpopoca. Itzcoatl, though initially a secondary choice for rule, would eventually lead Tenochtitlan to become the most powerful it had ever been to

that point in its history.

Illustration 5: An artistic rendering of Itzcoatl, one of the most influential figures in early Aztec imperial history.

When Itzcoatl took power, the war between the Aztec and the Tepanec was still in force. However, the Tepanec had gained more

than their share of enemies over the course of their rise to dominance over the region. During the lengthy reign of Tezozomoc, rebellions against Azcapotzalco's rule would probably have been considered too risky to be worthwhile. With the inherent fracturing that generally occurs when a long-lived and particularly powerful ruler is replaced by a younger and less able counterpart, however, many of the surrounding tribes were willing to take their chances fighting the Tepanec under Maxtla. It was, not surprisingly, from one of the city-states that had lost much of their power during the Tepanec rule that the Aztec would find support for their war on Maxtla. This city-state, which was already under Aztec influence and had close relations with Tenochtitlan, was Texcoco.

With an alliance of themselves, the people of Texcoco and other sympathetic groups around the area, the Aztec launched an attack on Maxtla in Azcapotzalco. Besieging the city, the allies trapped the Tepanec and their king, preventing them from moving into open combat in the field. After a long period of resistance, the Tepanec capital finally fell, and Maxtla was sacrificed to the Aztec gods. The Tepanec of Azcapotzalco, as a result, ceased to be the predominant power in the region. This role was filled by a freshly created alliance of three major city-states with Tenochtitlan at its head. This alliance, known today as the Aztec Triple Alliance, consisted of the great island city of Tenochtitlan itself, Texcoco, and the Tepanec city of Tlacopan. Though inhabited by members of the Tepanec tribe, Tlacopan sided with the Aztec in the war against Azcapotzalco, becoming the center

of Tepanec power afterward. These three allies, all inhabited by various groups of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples, would form the center of the Aztec Empire, which was soon to spread throughout central and southern Mexico.

With this series of developments, Itzcoatl found himself at the head of a powerful political and military alliance, a position rivaling that of Tezozomoc during his rule of the Tepanec. With this newfound power, Itzcoatl was not content to simply continue to rule over the lands already under his control. Instead, he began to expand Aztec influence into other parts of the Valley of Mexico. Near Lake Texcoco were two other large lakes, Chalco and Xochimilco. Like Lake Texcoco, both of these lakes were centers of advanced multi-tribal habitation, making them prime targets for conquest by the Aztecs, who were now in a definitively expansionist phase of their history. Over the course of Itzcoatl's reign, the city-states that existed around these lakes were systematically subjugated by military means or brought willingly into the Aztec sphere of influence. These cities, aside from simply offering a larger territory to the growing Aztec lands, also were a rich source of tributes to be paid to Tenochtitlan and the other members of the Triple Alliance.

Closer to home, Itzcoatl also undertook the conquest of Culhuacan, which was still a powerful and semi-independent city-state. The long history of ties between the Aztec and Culhuacan had allowed them to maintain a peaceful relationship until the time of Tezozomoc, during

which Aztec troops had been used to attack the city on behalf of the Tepanec. After the fall of Aczapotzalco, however, Culhuacan had briefly regained autonomy, but would soon be incorporated into the ever-growing list of city-states that were subservient to the states of the Triple Alliance. Later in his reign, Itzcoatl would seek to attach himself to the revered Toltec legacy associated with the rulers of Culhuacan by taking on the title of Lord of the Culhua (*Calhua teuctli*, in the Nahuatl language). Owing to the sheer respect the Aztecs held for any form of Toltec affiliation, the taking of this title would likely have further legitimized and improved the standing of Itzcoatl.

While Itzcoatl established his power in Tenochtitlan, the other two states of the Aztec Triple Alliance also gained prominence and prestige. Texcoco, in particular, gradually developed into a place of substantial commercial importance driven by its large population of skilled artisans. Though the Mexica and their capital at Tenochtitlan were by far the greatest power of the Aztec Empire, it would be erroneous to write off the influence of Texcoco and Tlacopan in these early years of imperial expansion, as both prospered as the Aztec Triple Alliance extended its influence across and even beyond the Valley of Mexico.

During this period, a remarkable figure came to prominence in Aztec politics who would shape the very character of the Aztec Empire. Though Itzcoatl was the *tlatoani* and therefore the ruler of Tenochtitlan, his nephew, man named Tlacaelel, would in truth

become nearly equal to his uncle in power during Itzcoatl's rule. Acting in the role of the primary adviser to Itzcoatl, Tlacaelel took a position analogous to a Grand Vizier, providing support and information to the *tlatoani.* Tlacaelel had begun his rise to power alongside Itzcoatl during the war with Azcapotzalco, but now was a political guide for both Tenochtitlan and the Triple Alliance (which he is partially credited with organizing) as a whole. Throughout much of the course of the history of the Aztec Empire, Tlacaelel would act as a power behind the throne, often influencing the direction of the empire without ever ruling it in his own right.

The rule of Itzcoatl would, once again, see a renovation of the Templo Mayor, probably in yet another attempt to affirm Aztec dominance to the various other peoples of the region (a consistent theme in the rule of Itzcoatl). Like many of this emperor's programs, it is very likely that Tlacaelel would play a strong role in the decision to expand the temple and in guiding the process. We also, here, begin to see emerging a theme of the development of the great temple being closely linked to the development and expansion of the Aztec state. As the empire grew richer and more powerful, the temple would be systematically updated, acting as a very physical and visible symbol of the power and influence of Tenochtitlan.

Itzcoatl would rule until his death in 1440. During his 13 year reign, Tenochtitlan had gone from being merely a regional power in the Tepanec sphere of influence to being the center of what was rapidly

becoming a centralized empire. During his lifetime, Itzcoatl appears to have paved the way for his own chosen successor to take the throne after his death. This successor, the famed Moctezuma I, would greatly expand the Aztec territories, turning them into a true empire. Itzcoatl had, over time and most likely at the urging of Tlacaelel, introduced an officially endorsed version of the Aztec history that greatly emphasized the legacy of Huitzilihuitl, who was the father of Moctezuma, thus facilitating his nephew's rise to the throne after his own death. Sadly, this rewriting of history resulted in the destruction of many original Aztec and other indigenous historical codices (a type of pictorial book that was the primary means of conveying historical and scientific knowledge in Mesoamerica).

Illustration 6:
Moctezuma I

At the outset of Moctezuma's reign, the Triple Alliance was certainly powerful, but its political systems were both uncertain and informal. Moctezuma seems to have realized the potential limitations of such informal alliances, and began working to establish specific rules and guidelines that would govern the alliance. The result of these efforts was a sweeping series of reforms that redefined both the relationship between the three states of the Triple Alliance and between conquered peoples and their Aztec rulers. Fundamental to this new arrangement was a system by which conquered lands and therefore the tributes that were paid by them would be allocated among the three ruling states. This system would give 40 percent of lands to both Tenochtitlan and

Texcoco, with the remaining 20 percent being allocated to the much less powerful Tlacopan.

The reforms also heavily impacted the ways in which conquered cities were governed. Prior to the time of Moctezuma, the Aztec had implemented a fairly liberal imperial system in which native kings and nobles would retain much of their power so long as they cooperated with and paid appropriate tribute to the Aztec. This same system, however, had allowed strong city-states to stage successful rebellions against the Tepanec at the end of Tezozomoc's reign. Most likely looking at this historical example, Moctezuma decided to greatly reduce the power of the city-states while implementing a nearly totalitarian system of Aztec rule. A central part of this system was the complete overtaking of education by the Aztec state, which would oversee the training of people of every station in society, from basic agrarian laborers to military personnel to the priestly class. This control over the education of the populous allowed the Aztecs to promote their own power and importance, as well as to instill a generally positive attitude toward Aztec rule into the youth of conquered cities in the course of their vocational training. Since Aztec history was often taught in these state schools, this system also allowed Moctezuma to more thoroughly promote the rewritten version of history that had originated with his predecessor.

A central feature of the reign of Moctezuma I was his series of wars in areas outside of the Valley of Mexico. A prominent example of this

was a war against the Mixtec, another of the major indigenous groups of Mexico at the time who were renowned for their skills as craftsman. Though the Mixtec would never come entirely under the control of the Aztec Empire, many individual city-states inhabited by Mixtec populations would find themselves as tributaries of the Aztecs over time. Along with the Mixtec, who lived south of the Aztec homeland, the military efforts of Moctezuma I carried Aztec power northward and especially to the east, where the Totonac people inhabited mountainous regions and areas along the coastline of the Gulf of Mexico.

Under the rule of Moctezuma I began one of the strangest military traditions in all of human history. This unusual custom was a series of ritual wars known as the Flower Wars, which occurred between the Aztec and regional tribes that they had not yet conquered. The Flower Wars involved the Aztec army meeting its enemies at a preset place and time in order to have a ceremonial series of battles. Though set out in advance and agreed upon by both sides, the Flower Wars included very real combat, resulting in death and capture for many. Like many of the major institutions of the Aztec Empire, the instigation of these ceremonial wars is generally accredited to Tlacealel, who was still acting as the prime adviser of the empire.

The purpose of the Flower Wars seems to have been twofold. The first purpose was to provide the Aztec military a chance to train and keep itself in peak fighting condition, acting more or less as a type of

incredibly realistic and deadly war game. The other purpose, one that was hugely important to the Aztecs, was to capture enemy prisoners for sacrifice to their gods. Human sacrifice on the scale of that practiced by the Aztec Empire extracted a massive toll in population, making it much more effective to sacrifice captives from enemy tribes. However, an even better solution was hit upon, likely by Tlacaelel himself, to ensure a regular stream of sacrifices for the gods. Enemy tribes that had not been conquered would engage in Flower Wars on a regular basis, ensuring that some of their population would be sent to the Aztec temples for sacrifice. The advantage for the enemy tribes, however, was great. As long as the Flower Wars fulfilled the Aztec purpose (which they continued to do until the end of the Aztec Empire's time line), the states faced no significant threat of invasion or conquest by the rulers of Tenochtitlan.

Also occurring during Moctezuma's reign was the construction of a new water supply at Tenochtitlan. The water of Lake Texcoco being brackish, all of the city's fresh water supply had to be drawn from natural springs in the area, such as those at nearby Chapultepec. To solve this problem, a reservoir to hold spring waters was constructed, along with a levee that would separate Lake Texcoco's water from the potable spring water. The inclusion of this levee and reservoir would allow the growing population of Tenochtitlan easier access to water when it was needed.

By the end of Moctezuma's reign in 1469, the Aztec Empire as a

cohesive political unit was fully established. Controlling lands both within and outside of their homeland in the Valley of Mexico, the Aztec were now the dominant force in central Mexico. Moctezuma's enforcement of harsh and strict rule over the peoples that had been brought into the empire would also largely set the tone for the manner in which the ruling Aztecs would relate to their subjects until the arrival of the Spaniards who would eventually destroy the Aztec Empire. In this sense, Moctezuma, though the second leader of the Triple Alliance, could be said to have been the ruler who truly established and defined the existence of the Aztec Empire.

Although the Templo Mayor had been renovated only very recently, Moctezuma I would start yet another project to add to it, building his next phase of the temple over the existing superstructure of the great pyramidal platform. As this phase of construction occurred at a time when Aztec power was very much on the rise, the fourth temple level reflects incredible prosperity and the power of a truly great empire. In particular, highly stylized sculptures throughout the stairways and the shrines themselves added during this phase would have greatly enhanced the already visually striking pyramid. This stage of construction, though initiated by Moctezuma, continued into the reign of his successor Axayacatl.

Moctezuma I was eventually succeeded by his grandson, Axayacatl, in 1469. Though probably not the first in line with regards to blood relation to the previous emperor, Axayacatl was selected because of

his distinguished leadership in the military campaigns of his grandfather. His reign would see a similar, if less successful, expansionist policy pursued to further expand the boundaries of Aztec power throughout central Mexico.

Four years into the reign of Axayacatl, in 1473, Tenochtitlan would engage in a war not with its enemies outside of its borders, but close to home and with a branch of its own people. Since the very beginnings of Aztec expansion throughout the Valley of Mexico, Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco had coexisted in relative harmony. However, for reasons that are today somewhat uncertain, the reign of Axayacatl saw the conquest and annexation of the semi-independent city of Tlatelolco by the people of Tenochtitlan. Two prime theories today are considered the most likely to account for this sudden change in Tenochtitlan's policy toward its sister city. The first is simply that it would have been advantageous for the growing imperial power of Tenochtitlan to control Tlatelolco directly, as it was still the greater hub of trade and commercial activity of the two cities. The second explanation posits that a revolution against centralized Aztec power in Tenochtitlan took place in Tlatelolco under the city's then-king, Moquihuix. While either of these explanations is certainly possible, it should be noted that the true cause of the conflict between the two cities has not been recorded by historical sources.

Another prominent series of events in the Aztec Empire during the rule of Axayacatl was a conflict with the nearby and much less well-

known political entity known as the Purepecha Empire, a large alliance of peoples known alternately as Purepecha or Tarascans that inhabited the areas just west of the Aztec Empire. As both states were in a period of growth and expansion, it was likely inevitable that they would find themselves at odds with each other at some point. The point of confrontation would ultimately begin in an area called the Toluca Valley, which lay on the borders between Aztec and Tarascan territory. The Toluca Valley, when this conflict began, had been controlled by the Purepecha Empire for less than 20 years. In the early 1470s, under the orders of Axayacatl, Aztec forces began to systematically take towns and villages that lay in the valley, igniting a general war between the two empires.

Initially, the war would go well for the Aztecs, who by this time in their history had become a military power to be reckoned with due to their near-constant military activities from the time of their alliance with the Tepanec onward. Though this war can be said to have begun in the early 1470s when the Aztec invasion of the Toluca Valley began, it would not truly reach its zenith until 1479, when the Aztecs pushed deeper into the territory of the Tarascan peoples, likely with the intent of completely annexing the Purepecha Empire into their own sphere of political influence. This effort, however, would end in disaster. Though the Aztec Empire was certainly militarily powerful, the Purepecha Empire was also a regional power more than capable of defending itself.

The Aztec forces, thought to have numbered slightly over 30,000, invaded the Purepacha Empire's central lands in 1479. A major battle ensued when they were met by an army of nearly 50,000 Tarascans which had been dispatched to carry out a counteroffensive and drive the Aztecs out of Tarascan territory. Regrettably, strategic and tactical details of the battle are scarce, but the end result is well-known to have been an overwhelming victory for the Tarascans, who thoroughly routed the Aztec forces and took large portions of the Aztec army as captives. For the Aztec Empire, which had been rapidly expanding since the formation of the Triple Alliance and which had become increasingly effective from a military perspective with each new conquest, the defeat was an unmitigated disaster.

Though his military endeavors would not be as successful as those of his immediate predecessors, the rule of Axayacatl was important in other ways. By sustaining the policies regarding the governing of the empire that had been established under Moctezuma I and Itzcoatl, Axayacatl largely ensured that these policies would continue as the norm for the relation of the Aztec state to its subjects. He also proved the ability of the Aztec Empire to weather severe defeats and crises. Aside from the defeat at the hands of the Purepecha Empire, Axayacatl's reign was also the time of a major earthquake in the Texcoco Basin that did substantial damage to Tenochtitlan. Though not a massive catastrophe, such a natural disaster would have been an important test of the ability of the imperial administration to respond to sudden crises. The military defeat of the Purepecha expedition

would also have tested the ability of Axayacatl and of the empire in general to hold power under difficult conditions.

Axayacatl would not live long after the disastrous Tarascan expedition, dying in 1481. Following his death, the royal line once again passed to a brother, rather than to a direct son or grandson of the previous king. In this case, the succeeding king was Tizoc, Axayacatl's younger brother. Tizoc would enjoy only a brief rule, but would still have time to continue the expansion of the empire, turning the fortunes of the Aztec around from their still recent defeat at the hands of the Purepacha Empire under the rule of Axayacatl. During his reign, many city-states beyond the northern extremes of what had to that point been the edges of the Aztec Empire were successfully annexed. However, it is unclear how much of this was Tizoc's doing. Some historical sources have portrayed Tizoc as a largely incompetent ruler, especially in military matters. It is quite possible that the military gains made during the time of Tizoc were largely a function of the existing and highly effective military apparatus that had been left to him by his various predecessors on the throne. Be that as it may, the gains that were made in this time were nonetheless useful to the expansion of the empire.

Chief among the city-states that were conquered under the rule (if perhaps not command) of Tizoc was Ecatepec, an important commercial center that acted as a hub between northern and central Mexico. Though a relatively small city-state in comparison to such

powerful cities as Tenochtitlan or Texcoco, Ecatepec was a useful addition to the Aztec Empire, which as we have seen thus far was at least as much concerned with trade and economics as it was with sheer territorial size or military power.

During the reign of Tizoc, further construction was also undertaken on the Templo Mayor. The additions made by Tizoc were relatively minor, mostly being concerned with new coverings for existing surfaces of the temple. In particular, this period would see a new layer of stucco applied to the main platform of the temple. This expansion, though certainly of a very minor nature, provides an important glimpse into the short reign of Tizoc, showing that he was still concerned with adding to his legacy with architectural achievements as well as new conquests. Another example of Tizoc's attempt to legitimize his reign can be seen in a sacrificial altar known as the Stone of Tizoc. The intricately carved stone shows multiple depictions of Tizoc, which are probably intended to demonstrate his religious contributions to the Aztec Empire. Once again, the supreme adviser Tlacaelel seems to have been involved in the reconstruction, overseeing elements of the renovation throughout 1483 and 1484 despite his advanced age.

Illustration 7: Tizoc (center) taking an enemy prisoner in war. Detail from a cast of the Tizoc Stone.

After only five years of rule, Tizoc would die in 1486. His successor was yet another brother, Ahuitzotl. Contrasting sharply with the reign of Tizoc, which at best had been a time of only minor successes, the rule of Ahuitzotl would see massive gains in both territory and power for the Aztec Empire. Ahuitzotl would play a critical role in reinvigorating the Aztec Empire after Tizoc's brief and less than spectacular reign. Aztec accounts portray Ahuitzotl in a very different light that Tizoc, showing him as a great military leader who was personally responsible for the conquests that occurred during his reign, while it is almost certain that the limited territorial gains made

under Tizoc were largely the work of subordinate military commanders among the Aztec nobility.

Though Ahuitzotl would be the ruler who would breathe new life into the Aztec Empire after Tizoc's rule, one of the first events of his reign would be the loss of one of the most crucial figures in all of Aztec history. In 1487, just one year after Ahuitzotl had assumed power, Tlacaelel would at last die at the extremely advanced age of 90. During his long tenure in various offices in the empire's elite nobility, Tlacaelel had guided the empire from the Tepanec war to the hegemonic rule of Central America, having a profound impact on Aztec society, religion, history and warfare in the process. Thus, Ahuitzotl's reign would enter uncharted territory, since for the first time since its formation the Aztec Empire would no longer have its long-time principle adviser to turn to. Tlacaelel was succeeded in his position by his son Tlilpotoncatzin upon his death. Though a capable adviser and a soldier of some repute, neither Tlilopotoncatzin nor his own eventual successor would equal or surpass the singularly illustrious Tlacaelel in either influence or accomplishments.

The first stage of Ahuitzotl's reign would be marked by an uprising in the north, among the Huastec peoples that had been incorporated into the Aztec Empire during the rules of Axayacatl and Tizoc. Not only did Ahuitzotl put down this rebellion swiftly and decisively, he also took the opportunity to push the boundaries of his empire farther to the north and deeper into Huastec territory. This expansion would see

the Aztec Empire reach its northernmost historical limits. However, Ahuitzotl was far from finished with his expansion of the Aztec territories. Next, he would look to the south, where another equally great civilization of Central America, the noted Zapotec people, held dominion.

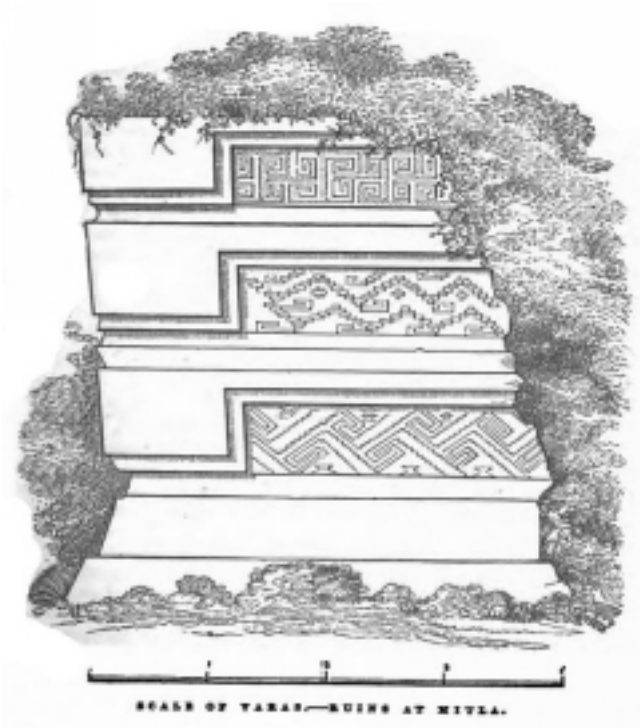

Illustration 8: An 1847 sketch of the ruins of Mitla, the most important Zapotec archaeological site in Oaxaca.

The Zapotec were a civilization that vastly predated the Aztecs in the region, as

archaeological evidence has shown that their society existed with a high degree of continuity from about 500 BCE onward. Because of the close proximity of the two, the Zapotec often found themselves as rivals of Mixtec groups, which were also the targets of Aztec expansion during the time of Ahuitzotl. Indeed, it was in one of the areas where the two great civilizations overlapped that the Aztec conquest would be most prominent. This area is today known as the Oaxaca Valley, and was alternately dominated by its indigenous Mixtec and Zapotec populations for a period of several hundred years prior to the Aztec incursion. Once the area was fully subjugated, the Aztec established a major military outpost in the city of Huaxyacac. This outpost was used not only to collect the necessary tributes from the southernmost portion of the Aztec Empire, but also to consolidate military power in a region far removed from the central Aztec homelands in the Valley of Mexico.

The Oaxaca Valley, which lies in the southern regions of Mexico, would also open up the gateway to Aztec conquests farther to the south. These conquests, interestingly, would not include central or landlocked areas, but instead would be focused almost exclusively on the coastal regions running south along the Pacific Ocean. Many possible reasons exist for this strategy. The first, and most reasonable, is that the central areas farther to the south were still controlled by the remnants of the Mayan civilization. Though long past their heights in the Mesoamerican Classical Period (roughly 3rd through 11th centuries CE), the Maya would still have been a regional force more

than capable of defending their own lands. This is especially true given the fact that inland southern Mexico and Guatemala, the regions that the Aztec would have invaded had they moved north away from the coasts, are quite mountainous, making it difficult for invading forces to successfully attack defenders. Another possible reasons contributing to the coastal strategy is the fact that the coasts would have been of the most commercial value in terms of the resources available there.

Ahuitzotl, though certainly an accomplished military strategist and commander, also seems to have been concerned with reinvigorating Aztec domestic life, which had languished under his brother Tizoc. To this end, Ahuitzotl began a major reconstruction project in Tenochtitlan aimed at making the city even grander than it already was. Though there was very likely a great deal of pragmatism in this move, the rebuilding of Tenochtitlan was also certainly a political statement. By this time, the Aztec Empire was by far the dominant political and military force in central Mexico, even though the diminished Purepacha Empire and several of the Zapotec states still existed to the west and south, respectively, as independent powers. Thus, the elaborate reconstruction of Tenochtitlan during the reign of Ahuitzotl was very likely a direct demonstration of the wealth and power of his empire, a phenomenon for which there are ample parallels in ancient and modern civilizations the world over.

Though the entire city would find itself under new construction, the

central facet of Ahuitzotl's building program was yet another phase of the Templo Mayor. This stage of construction probably originated from the completion of some of the more minor additions begun during Tizoc's reign. For this reason, there is much continuity between the fifth and sixth stages of construction at the Templo Mayor. However, after completing the resurfacing that Tizoc had started, Ahuitzotl would begin to implement his own plans for the temple. New shrines and wall decorations were added, and a massive ceremony to officially open the new temple was planned. This ceremony, presided over by Ahuitzotl, was a four day festival that likely would have been the capstone on the emperor's plan to demonstrate the grandeur and power of his city and his empire. Thousands or perhaps even tens of thousands of captives were sacrificed in what may have been the single largest mass human sacrifice in all of history (though since the numbers are unconfirmed, there is no way of objectively measuring this). Accounts suggest massive lines of human sacrifices coming from all directions and being systematically dispatched in the ritual areas atop the pyramidal temple. Though there may be some exaggeration to these accounts, it is even said that the plaza below the temple and the steps of the pyramid became entirely covered in blood from the sheer amount of it that was flowing from the sacrificial altars. Though shocking to modern sensibilities, the carnage of this event serves as a very vivid reminder of just how crucial the rites of human sacrifice were to the Aztecs and their theological views. Certainly, such vast numbers of humans (each of which, remember, held potential value as an

individual economic unit of the Aztec Empire) would not have been ritually sacrificed were this not the case.

Ahuitzotl died in 1502, having ruled the Aztec Empire for 16 years. His rule had seen a massive expansion of the Aztec territories, as well as a general reversal of the plateau phase that the Aztec society had reached during the later years of Axayacatl and Tizoc. A potential burial site for Ahuitzotl was identified in 2007 by a team of archaeologists making use of ground-penetrating radar technology. However, the site proved to be a false lead, though some valuable artifacts were discovered in the excavation process. Some researchers believe that the tomb site was authentic, but that the ashes (Aztec burial rites tended to favor cremation) had been removed at an earlier point in history. After his rule came that of the last independent ruler of the Aztecs and their last true emperor, Moctezuma II. Moctezuma II was the son of Axayacatl and therefore the nephew of Ahuitzotl. At the close of Ahuitzotl's reign, the Aztec Empire was larger and more powerful than it had ever been before. Such was the state of the greatest political power in Mesoamerica when it was passed to the second Moctezuma. The new ruler would continue the expansion of the empire, just as his predecessors had done. However, it was also Moctezuma II that would ultimately be confronted with the battle that the Aztecs simply could not win: the invasion of the Spaniards.

Illustration 9:
Moctezuma II

Though disaster in the form of foreign conquest was on the horizon, the bulk of Moctezuma II's reign would occur before the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. The years before their arrival were largely a continuance of the Aztec growth and upswing that had so notably defined the rule of Ahuitzotl. Militarily, the defining characteristic of Moctezuma II's regnal years was the final conquest of the Zapotec kingdoms that lay directly to the south of the Aztec homelands. Though the Aztec had pushed extensively to the southeast and southwest, the central Zapotec lands had always been inaccessible because of the military strength held by the Zapotecs. However, this status quo was soon to change. Under Moctezuma's leadership, the

Aztecs swept southward, finally taking the rich and powerful Zapotec civilization entirely into their sphere of influence. This left the Aztecs in almost total control of the areas surrounding them, with only the remnants of the Purepacha Empire and some Mixtec regions remaining independent within central Mexico.

The conquest of the Zapotec, had it not come on the eve of the Aztec Empire's destruction, might have been one of the most important events that had ever occurred in Aztec history. Because of the age and societal maturity of the Zapotec civilization, this conquest opened up a rich and well-developed economy to the Aztecs, potentially offering benefits in the form of both new trade routes and large tributes. In time, these economic benefits might have powered the empire and facilitated even broader expansions of Aztec power. However, this would not be the case, due to the sudden and disastrous end that would soon meet the empire.

Aside from his role as a military commander, Moctezuma II was also a social reformer. The Aztec social system had, at this point, been more or less stable since the rule of his namesake, Moctezuma I. Though the existing system had proven quite effective, Moctezuma II seems to have had the implementation of a new system in mind. Unlike the social reformers in the earliest years of the Aztec imperial history, Moctezuma II favored an even more strictly stratified society. That is, his system would have more clearly defined and widened the boundaries between the higher and lower classes of society within the

empire. It is unclear why, after such a long period of the existence of some social mobility (mostly through inclusion in the priesthood and military advancement) that had worked so well, the new emperor would have favored such a policy. One quite understandable explanation might be that Moctezuma II was concerned with the preservation of power in a social elite that could be strictly and carefully controlled by the central government in Tenochtitlan. Increased socio-economic mobility might have increased the chances for rebellions against the Aztec and their proxy rulers, especially as the empire grew larger and harder to regulate. Whatever the cause, it is a regrettable fact that we will never know the long-term effects of these social reforms, as they were followed closely by the arrival of the first Spanish soldiers.

Section Four

The Arrival of the Spaniards and the Fall of the Empire

The Spanish conquest of central Mexico began in February of the

year 1519, when the noted Spanish explorer Hernan Cortes landed with a small but well-armed force of Spanish soldiers on the shores of the Yucatan peninsula. Here, he first encountered the declined but still powerful Maya peoples, with whom he both fought and conducted diplomatic relations before moving on the lands of the Aztec Empire. Because our topic in this short work is the Aztec civilization, we will not here dwell on the Mayan encounters with Cortes, except to note that it was very likely from the Maya of the Yucatan that Cortes would have learned of the existence of a large, wealthy and powerful empire in the central portions of what is today Mexico.

Illustration 10: Hernan Cortes, the conquistador who would ultimately engineer the downfall of the Aztec Empire

With this landing in 1519 in an area that was not even controlled by Moctezuma II, a series of events would begin that, within only two and a half years, would result in the destruction of the magnificent empire that had been created by the Aztecs. Though this would be far from the first incursion of the Spaniards into indigenous lands, the taking of the Aztec Empire would be one of the more important stages in the Spanish colonization of the Americas. At this time, the Spanish were, much like the Aztecs, in a markedly expansionist phase of their

history. By organizing incursions into parts of Central America dominated by indigenous peoples without the advanced military technology held by the Europeans, the Spaniards had been able to subdue many native populations and acquire territories rich in resources that could be exploited to increase the wealth of Spain and its growing colonial empire.

In the buildup to his contact with the Aztec Empire, Cortes was favored by chance in finding two interpreters who, when combined, could successfully relay the Spanish spoken by Cortes into the native Nahuatl language spoken by the Aztecs. The first stage of this chain of translation was a fellow Spaniard by the name of Geronimo de Aguilar. Aguilar, who had been shipwrecked on the coast of the Yucatan, had been taken in by a local Maya tribe from whom he learned the Mayan tongue. After being recovered by Cortes, Aguilar acted as his translator to the various Maya groups he encountered and fought with in the Yucatan. However, one more step would be needed in order to facilitate Nahuatl communication. This next stage of translation came in the form of a woman whose birth name was probably Malintzin, but who was called Marina by Cortes and other Spanish speakers. Malintzin was a Nahua herself, related to the dominant Aztec tribe of the Mexica, but also spoke the Mayan language. After receiving Aguilar's translation from Spanish into Maya, Malintzin could relay the message in Nahuatl to the Aztecs and other speakers of the language that surrounded them. This system, though very likely rendering imperfect translations, would allow

Cortes to at least roughly communicate with the native peoples of central and southern Mexico.

Cortes would first found his coastal base at Veracruz, giving him a stable place from which to conduct exploratory and military expeditions into the inland areas of Mexico. Veracruz was founded in a place along the Gulf of Mexico that was almost due east from lake Texcoco and the many settlements that existed around it. Being so close to Aztec territory, it is certain that the Aztecs in Tenochtitlan would have been made aware of the Spanish presence shortly after the arrival of Cortes and his men. At first, however, the Aztec Empire does not appear to have acted on the matter, possibly considering it insignificant in comparison to the broader business of governing the many lands that had been brought under Aztec dominion. Instead, ambassadors were sent to greet Cortes when word reached Tenochtitlan of his arrival, but no immediate moves were made by Moctezuma or his generals. As was Aztec custom at such a meeting, the ambassadors came bearing gifts of gold for the stranger to their shore, and are recorded to have been given a demonstration of Spanish canons and muskets. Ironically, it would not be long before the very wealth that allowed the Aztec to greet Cortes with gifts would soon result in those very same guns being turned upon them.

Illustration 11: A panoramic view of the archaeological site of Cempoala, where Cortes first made contact with the Totonac.

On one of his early expeditions to the south of Veracruz, Cortes discovered the nearby native settlement of Cempoala. Though Cempoala and the area that surrounded it were home to some groups of Zapotec descent, it was primarily controlled by Totonac rulers who had become subjects of the Aztec Empire under the rule of Moctezuma I. In accordance with the imperial policies that Moctezuma and his successors had enacted, the Totonac in Cempoala were strictly controlled by the centralized empire and made to pay large tributes to Tenochtitlan. This state of affairs is what would ultimately allow Hernan Cortes, who commanded fewer than 2,000 Spanish soldiers, to

topple the greatest empire in Mesoamerica. The Aztecs, in pursuing harsh policies and demanding massive tributes, had sown the seeds of their own destruction.

In order to show that he would back a revolution against the Aztec, Cortes took five Aztec tax collectors in Cempoala as hostages. Emissaries from Tenochtitlan would soon return to Veracruz with offerings of gold to attempt to persuade Cortes to release the officials. Though the collectors were ultimately released, the fact that Cortes had dared to take them in the first place and only returned them after essentially having been bribed by the powerful Aztec Empire clearly signaled to the tribes under the Aztec that he would be an ally worth having in any uprising against Tenochtitlan.

It was also at this meeting over the tax collectors, according to Spanish sources, that Cortes first became aware that the Aztec believed that he may have been a god they had long awaited the return of. However, there are many disputes as to the legitimacy and accuracy of this claim. Spanish accounts would have it that this belief in the divinity of Cortes and the Spaniards was perhaps the single greatest key to the conquest of the Aztec. There is very little reason to believe, however, that the Aztec truly believed them to be gods. To begin with, Cortes and his men worked with only the very roughest of translations made from Spanish to Mayan to Nahuatl and back along the same chain, making it unlikely that they accurately understood what was being said about such complex matters as theology.

Secondly, the Spaniards lacked any real understanding of Aztec or broader Nahua culture, meaning that the “god” interpretation was probably a meaning attached to certain words and events by Cortes or his men without actually understanding Aztec theology. The Spanish records also frequently confuse the god Quetzalcoatl, the god the Spanish claim Cortes was identified as, with a probably semi-mythical ruler of the Toltec named Ce Acatl Topiltzin. This means that the Spanish could have confused a compliment equating Cortes with a venerated and respected historical figure for the idea that he was a god. Finally, it is altogether possible that the interpretation that Cortes was a god to the Aztecs was simply fabricated by the Spanish to paint the Aztecs as primitives or savages, lining up quite conveniently with the Spanish agenda that favored the forced Christianization of indigenous peoples.

Before proceeding further with his plan to conquer the Aztec, Cortes would encounter a setback, but one that would ultimately work in his favor. In commanding the expedition, Cortes had directly disobeyed orders from the governor of Cuba, who had withdrawn the commission for Cortes to lead it just before it began. Some of his men were now of the opinion that the fleet should return to Cuba and act in accordance with the law, which would have required Cortes to be treated as a traitor for his unauthorized taking of a Spanish fleet. Cortes, however, would circumvent any such plans by the simple yet bold expedient of scuttling his own ships in the waters beyond Veracruz. (*Note: This event has historically been misidentified as the*

burning of the ships, which did not, in fact, occur). This had the added benefit of placing the Spaniards under the command of Cortes in a position where they would either win their fight against the Aztecs or certainly die in the attempt, as there was now no exit strategy open to them. Such a motivational factor and its usefulness in war, though this work would not have been known to Cortes, would be nicely summarized by the 6th century BCE Chinese martial philosopher Sun Tzu when he quipped "on dying ground, fight" in his masterpiece *The Art of War*.

Cortes would next proceed inland from his coastal base in Veracruz toward the Aztec capital at Tenochtitlan. To this point, the Aztec had more encouraged than discouraged Cortes from making his way to Tenochtitlan through their consistent polite treatment and, more importantly, the richness of the gifts given to him in exchange for the release of the tax collectors from Cempoala. The Totonacs of Cempoala, meanwhile, had contributed about 200 additional soldiers to the Spanish army. Though this was fairly insignificant when compared to the military might of the Aztec Empire, another ally would present itself on the march from Veracruz to Tenochtitlan. This ally, in the form of the peoples of Tlaxcala, would go on to give Cortes a fighting force capable of doing battle on even footing with the Aztecs.

The peoples of Tlaxcala, which was a loose tribal confederation, were of the same general Nahua descent as the Aztec. Despite this,

like many other Nahua groups, they and the Aztecs were bitter enemies. Since the institution of the strange and ceremonial Flower Wars, the Tlaxcala had been one of the principle groups against which these wars were waged. Though this arrangement had never resulted in their complete annexation into the Aztec Empire, it had cost them dearly in lives and resources, making them one of the most vehement enemies of the Aztecs. At first, the Tlaxcalans met the Spaniards as enemies, an understandable reaction given that Cortes was moving an army through their territory. A series of battles ensued in which the Spanish force was often surrounded and forced to fight for every inch of ground against a vastly numerically superior force. Historical accounts suggest that the Tlaxcalans probably would have defeated and killed the Spanish force, had the Spanish not relayed to them that they, too, were enemies of the Aztec Empire. Once this had been realized by the Tlaxcalans, however, an alliance was quickly forged. Indeed, this alliance would prove to be incredibly beneficial for the Tlaxcalans, who would be allowed to retain a much higher degree of independence and cultural uniqueness in Spanish-ruled Mexico (at least in the early colonial period) than any of the other tribes of the area.

In one of the few instances in which the Spanish treated equitably with indigenous groups, Cortes would neither destroy any Tlaxcalan cities nor loot them. The Tlaxcalans, however, did offer military support to the Spaniards, an act that seems to have resulted in a very real friendship between the two groups that would carry over into the

early colonial period. Upon leaving Tlaxcala with a fresh contingent of native troops as his allies, Cortes would proceed to the important commercial and religious city of Cholula. This path was selected at the urging of the Aztec ambassadors who were still attached to Cortes and who were rapidly beginning to suspect that his actions toward the Aztec would likely not be amenable.

By the time that Cortes redirected his march to Cholula, Moctezuma II seems to have already made the decision that the Spaniards should be stopped from marching closer to Tenochtitlan, apparently beginning to perceive them for the threat that they truly were. As the ambassadors who first met Cortes at Veracruz had seen what the Spanish cannons were capable of, the Aztec seem to have planned to eliminate them by subterfuge, rather than by facing them openly in the field. Cortes and his men were allowed peacefully into Cholula, which did not command an army large enough to have offered serious resistance to the Spaniards and their mixed army of Tlaxcalans and Totonacs from Cempoala. For several days, the Spanish army stayed in Cholula, a period of time probably allowed by the Aztecs to lull them into a false sense of security. The plan, if Spanish sources record it correctly, was apparently for the small military force that did reside in Cholula to attack the Spaniards as they slept and kill them without giving them the opportunity to make use of their superior military technology. Tactically, the plan was a good one, as it would mitigate the advantages in numbers and firepower that the Spaniards held. However, the plan would go horribly awry and result in a bloodbath

throughout Cholula.

The Spaniards, supposedly through intelligence gathered by Malintzin on their behalf, became aware of the plot. An alternate version of the story, conveyed by the Tlaxcalans to later Spanish historians, suggests that the Spanish attack of Cholula was not in fact the result of a plot against them, but revenge for the capture and murder of a Tlaxcalan emissary. Regardless of the cause, Cholula was quickly burned and its people killed by Cortes and his newfound allies. In all, some 3,000 citizens of the religious center are believed to have been put to death in a single day by the Spanish soldiers. The threat that the European invaders posed to the Aztec Empire had now been made shockingly clear, and there was little doubt that a war between the two was brewing.

The next exchange of emissaries between Cortes and Moctezuma II would result in the invitation of Cortes to Tenochtitlan itself. Whether Moctezuma had ordered the people of Cholula to kill the Spaniards or not, it now must have been abundantly clear to the Aztec Emperor that the newcomers to his shores were a credible threat and that something would have to be done about them. Cortes, at this point, would probably have pressed on to Tenochtitlan with or without the invitation, as reaching the city had been the primary concern of his expedition. On November 8th of 1519, just over six months after the Spanish ships had landed first at Veracruz, Moctezuma II met Hernan Cortes in an opulent public ceremony to welcome the outsiders to the

city. Along with Moctezuma, the representative kings of the other two members of the Triple Alliance, as well as the king of Tlatelolco, were in attendance.

The section of the account that follows after this is a matter of much dispute and debate among historical academics. We have already discussed the several potential problems with the Spanish interpretation that the Aztecs believed Cortes and his men to be gods, and it is at this point that the Spanish accounts lean heavily on this idea to explain their version of events. Supposedly, once Cortes had been formally greeted by Moctezuma and the other kings, he was informed in a speech given by the Aztec emperor that the city and indeed the throne of the Aztec Empire itself were his. Moctezuma, if these account reflect historical reality, even went so far as to submit himself to the authority of the king of Spain once he had been informed by Cortes that he (Cortes) came as the representative of another king. Following is a portion of a surviving version of the speech, recorded in a historical document known as the Florentine Codex (see the section on Aztec writing and codices for more information.)

Our lord, you are very welcome in your arrival in this land. You have come to satisfy your curiosity about your noble city of Mexico (referring to Tenochtitlan). *You have come here to sit on your throne, to sit under its canopy, which I have kept for you a while. For the rulers and governors of past times are gone…Will they come back to the place of their absence?*

If even one came, he might witness the marvel that has taken place in my time...For I am not just dreaming, not just sleepwalking, not seeing you in my dreams...I have been worried for a long time, looking toward the unknown from which you have come...For our rulers departed, saying that you would come to your city and sit upon your throne...Go enjoy your palace, rest your body. Welcome, our lords, to this land.

This version of events begins to break down at a number of points. Firstly, at the ceremony, Cortes was supposedly stopped from physically touching Moctezuma, even though the emperor had just draped him and his senior subordinates with flowers as a show of respect and honor. This event is inconsistent with the idea that Moctezuma was literally offering up the rule of his empire to the Spaniards. Later resistance on the part of Moctezuma to demands made by Cortes (see below) would also seem to bear out the idea that the emperor was not simply giving up rule of his empire. Some historians have suggested that the concept that the Spaniards were received as gods was made up entirely by the Spanish. Others have suggested that the speech given by Moctezuma or at least something very similar to it did occur, but that it was actually a display of dominance on the part of the Aztec emperor. Though it may seem strange to modern Western cultures, politeness and generosity were considered by the Aztecs to have been a means by which to show power. It is therefore possible that Moctezuma made a speech at least similar in nature to the one described above designed to convey his supremacy, rather than his submission.

Cortes and his subordinate leaders were given housing in the royal palace complex of Axayacatl, another indication of supreme honor laid upon them. A point of tension, however, would rapidly arise between Moctezuma and his guests. Though the Spanish colonization of the Americas was at its core an economic and military endeavor, an ulterior motive existed in the form of the desire to convert the indigenous peoples of the New World to Christianity. Just before Spain's age of exploration and colonization had begun, the Christian rulers of Spain had finished the *Reconquista*, or the driving out of Spain's long-time Muslim inhabitants, the Moors. Christian resistance to the Moorish occupation of Spain had been occurring for over 700 years, and the final push against the Muslims of the Iberian Peninsula would drive an explosion of Catholic religious fervor in Christian Spain. This same phenomenon would ultimately be the driving force behind the Spanish Inquisition, which had been set up a little over a decade before the complete ouster of the Moors would be achieved.

The same religious spirit would compel Cortes to ask for symbols representative of Christianity, namely a cross and a statue of Mary, to be added to the Templo Mayor in addition to the Aztec gods already represented there as idol statues. Though seemingly a small event, the Aztec response to this request may give us a glimpse into the true standing of Cortes in the eyes of the Aztec. Moctezuma II refused on the grounds that such an addition might offend the gods represented by the idols. The reason that this is significant is that it may show that

the Aztec did not actually believe Cortes to be a divine being. We may of course reason that the idols atop the Templo Mayor represented gods who were very real to the Aztec, given the amount of devotion and human sacrifice paid to them at the temple. If, however, Cortes was truly seen as a god, Moctezuma would have found himself in the position of offending his deities either by accepting or refusing the request. The fact that Moctezuma decided that offending Cortes with his refusal was a better path than offending gods we know the Aztec genuinely believed in shows that Cortes was a lower priority than the known Aztec gods, possibly refuting the idea of his supposed divinity among the Aztecs altogether.

A series of events then took place that effectively rendered Moctezuma a prisoner in his own palace and which would eventually lead to the death of the last fully independent Aztec emperor. The Aztec, very possibly at the order of an increasingly concerned Moctezuma, had killed a handful of the Spaniards left behind at the coast by Cortes when he had ventured inland toward Tenochtitlan. When word of this reached Cortes, he and a group of his men effectively kidnapped Moctezuma, threatening him with execution unless he remained in the palace with them and gave commands to his people as Cortes ordered. These events happened on November 14th, 1519, only 11 days after Cortes had entered the city. With Moctezuma his captive and the Aztec nobility initially unwilling to take any action that might put their leader in mortal danger, the *conquistador* exercised nearly unilateral power. Whether or not the offer of the

throne to Cortes upon his entrance into the city was genuine, Hernan Cortes was now, for all practical intents and purposes, the ruler of the Aztec Empire.

From November until April of 1520, Cortes exercised power through the captive emperor. From surviving accounts, it would seem that Moctezuma was treated with respect by the Spanish, but he was still their prisoner and under the constant threat of death if he did not comply with their demands. As time went on, these demands grew greater and greater, until Cortes even forced the Aztec Empire to ready a massive tribute of gold and treasure for the king of Spain, the ultimate humiliation for an empire built on the tributes of the lands under its command.

This state of affairs, which was by far the easiest way for Cortes to rule the Aztec Empire, would probably have continued on for sometime if, in the spring of 1520, a second group of Spaniards had not arrived on the coast. This group, comprised of 1400 men and led by a *conquistador* by the name of Panfilo de Nervaez, had been sent by the Spanish governor of Cuba to capture Cortes and bring him back for trial for having led the expedition to Mexico after having had his commission withdrawn. Worse for Cortes, Nervaez had been legally appointed governor of Mexico, giving him legal authority over Cortes and his men. Cortes, however, had been acting illegally at every stage of his expedition, and so was not now inclined to cooperate.

Word was sent through both Aztec and Spanish channels about Nervaez's expedition to Tenochtitlan, where Cortes was forced to make a decision about how to proceed. If he left, he risked an uprising in Tenochtitlan, but the threat of Nervaez and 1400 Spanish soldiers was too great to simply ignore. Ultimately, Cortes would divide his forces, leaving a small number in the Aztec capital city while taking the bulk of his troops to intercept Nervaez before he could proceed inland. The strategy, though probably the best option open to Cortes at the time, would prove disastrous, as we shall shortly see. Finding Nervaez in Cempoala, Cortes staged a night raid and was able to easily overcome the larger force through the element of surprise. Nervaez was captured and imprisoned at Veracruz, but Cortes saw the men under his command as potentially valuable assets. Telling them of the wealth of the empire he had encountered farther inland, he was able to convince almost all of them to shift their allegiance from Nervaez to him.

While Cortes solidified his new alliances in Cempoala and prepared to march back to Tenochtitlan, disaster was brewing in the city. Each May, the Aztec celebrated a religious festival called *Toxcatl* to honor the god Tezcatlipoca, one of the central deities of the Aztec pantheon. Despite the intrusion of the Spanish into their midst, the Aztec continued on with this tradition, which was seen as vitally important. The end of the *Toxcatl* of 1520, however, would be a massacre of almost every Aztec in attendance at the hands of the soldiers under the command of Pedro de Alverado, the subordinate of Cortes who

had been left in command of Tenochtitlan. Closing off the Templo Mayor by stationing men at its various entrances, Alverado, if contemporary accounts are accurate, had his men move through the plaza and rooms of the temple, executing everyone they encountered.

Several different possibilities have been presented for why Alverado decided to begin the massacre. Upon his return, Cortes interviewed the men who had remained in the city attempting to find out why the massacre had taken place and was apparently met with a diverse and often contradictory set of explanations. Among these explanations was an unsubstantiated rumor that the Aztec had planned to use the event of the festival to organize a large number of warriors together, as was customary at such events, who would then turn on the Spaniards and rescue Moctezuma at the festival's end, taking advantage of Cortes' absence. Others claimed that the massacre had been done to stop a human sacrifice, which was part of the festival and would have been horrendous to Spanish Catholic sensibilities (though it is doubtful, given their extended stay in Tenochtitlan, that the Spanish would not have encountered a human sacrifice before this). Yet another explanation has been suggested that simple greed drove Alverado, as even the Spanish accounts of the incident note that the Spaniards stole the golden jewelry from the bodies of their victims after the massacre. If this was the case, the supposed uprising may have been nothing more than a *post hoc* rationalization for the massacre invented by Alverado and those loyal to him out of whole cloth and a seemingly reasonable set of circumstances that would have facilitated it.

Regardless of the underlying motivation behind the massacre, the murder of so many Aztecs at one of their most important religious festivals would be the event that would ultimately break the careful balance Cortes had established in ruling by proxy through the captive Moctezuma II. The Aztecs now readied for a rebellion against the Spaniards, and having illegally seized and imprisoned Nervaez, Cortes would have no choice but to fight, as his return with anything less than a massive acquisition of land and wealth for the Spanish crown would certainly have meant his death.

While Cortes struggled to come up with a plan that would extricate him from the predicament that Alverado's hasty actions had suddenly placed him in, the Aztec were mobilizing to retake their city. It had become all too clear that Moctezuma was acting as a pawn of the Spaniards. As such, the council of elders in Tenochtitlan voted to depose Moctezuma as emperor, electing instead his younger brother Cuitlahuac. The Spaniards tried one last time to use Moctezuma as their trump card, hoping that the threat to his life would still concern the Aztec, especially his brother. On July 1st, 1520, the Spaniards forced Moctezuma to address his former subjects from a balcony of his palace in an attempt to calm them and prevent them from rising up against the Spanish. However, events had already progressed too far for such a tactic to work. The people of Tenochtitlan, having realized that their emperor had been acting as a puppet for the very invaders responsible for the violent massacre at the *Toxcatl*, are said to have

thrown stones at the balcony hoping to wound or even kill their former leader for his betrayal. Moctezuma II would die that day, though accounts of exactly how differ. The Spanish claimed that one of the stones had hit Moctezuma and injured him so badly that he would eventually die of his wounds. The Aztec, however, claimed that the Spaniards murdered him when he failed to calm the people.

Illustration 12: Cuitlahuac, the final tlatoani of Tenochtitlan and successor to Moctezuma II

Cortes was now forced to flee, having lost the only means of control

he had had over the people of Tenochtitlan and the Aztec Empire as a whole. The alliance that had been forged between the Spanish and the Tlaxcalans made the lands held by those peoples the obvious and most available point of retreat where Cortes and his men could safely reside without fear of Aztec attack. However, the flight to the Tlaxcalan lands would be a dangerous and difficult one. First, Cortes and his men had to cross the causeways that connected the island city of Tenochtitlan to the mainland, which the Aztec had blocked by removing sections of the bridges. The Spaniards constructed their own replacement for the bridge section, but came under attack during the crossing. Many of the men under Cortes' command died covering the Spanish retreat from the Aztec forces that came from their rear in the city to attack them, and many more drowned attempting to swim to the mainland. Now, the only way for Cortes to preserve the lives of his soldiers was to make it into Tlaxcalan territory.

The next phase of the retreat to Tlaxcala was the Battle of Otumba, which by all common military wisdom should have been the end of Cortes and the small army of Spaniards and Tlaxcalans under his command. Once Cortes had escaped the city, the Aztec had mobilized their forces, deciding to end the Spanish invasion once and for all. With a dead emperor and a massacre to avenge, the Aztec rallied a disproportionately large force to pursue the Spanish and slaughter them to a man. If accounts of the battle bear even the slightest resemblance to historical reality, the Spaniards would have been outnumbered by ratios potentially as high as 100 to one when they

met the Aztec forces at Otumba. Clearly, the Aztec should have been victorious.

However, the battle would not go in their favor. Realizing that he could not possibly defeat the massive force that had pursued him, Cortes hit upon a strategy of targeting the commanders of the army, knowing that the Aztec warriors would find the mass killing of their leaders unacceptable. The prime target was an Aztec noble and general named Matlatzincatl, who was in command of the entire Aztec army sent to finish the Spaniards. This tactic would ultimately prove successful. The Aztec, thrown into disarray by the Spanish cavalry (having never encountered soldiers on horseback before) left an opening by which Cortes and a small group of his men were able to strike at Matlatzincatl. While the rest attacked the elite warriors surrounding the Aztec commander, a fellow *conquistador* named Juan de Salamanca dealt a death blow to Matlatzincatl. With their commander dead, the Aztec retreated from the battlefield, having killed fewer than 100 Spaniards in the process. The military reasoning for this proves a puzzle to this day, as other commanders could have stepped in, and there was certainly no doubt that the Aztec force could have destroyed the Spaniards at the battle.

With the Battle of Otumba over, the Spaniards continued their retreat until they reached friendly Tlaxcalan territory. Though they had failed to destroy the Spanish force, the Aztec would, at this point, have appeared to be the victors in the war. With Cortes trapped in

Tlaxcala and the Aztecs ready to slaughter his men when and if they ever returned to territory controlled by the Aztec Empire, the Spanish threat must have seemed quite minimal. Indeed, at this point, the Aztec Empire may have returned to its normal historical course had it not been for a final weapon that the Spanish had left behind in Tenochtitlan without even realizing they had done so: smallpox.

Modern epidemiologists have taken much interest in the smallpox epidemic of 1520, as it is a massive historical type case for the chain of events that can occur when a foreign pathogen is introduced into a population that has never been exposed to it before. Diverting ever so briefly from a historical perspective to a scientific, modern researchers describe populations affected by epidemics using a model called SIR (an acronym for Susceptible, Infectious and Removed). Susceptible individuals are those who have not yet been exposed to the disease. Infectious individuals are those who have contracted it and can actively spread it, while removed individuals are those in whom the pathogen has run its course, resulting either in death or an acquired immunity to reinfection. In a place where a given pathogen is fairly common, the impact of an epidemic is limited by the presence of removed individuals who have acquired an immunity.

In the case of the Aztec smallpox epidemic, however, there were no immune individuals to limit the spread of infection. Additionally, the Aztec may have lacked a genetic predisposition to higher immunity that European populations had. Generally speaking, smallpox carried a

30% mortality rate for those infected in European populations. However, among the Aztec, the disease spread like wildfire, killing an estimated 90% of those who became infected. Some have suggested that populations native to places where smallpox was common may have achieved a degree of genetic immunity over time, as those with a predisposition to be able to defend against it would have been more likely to survive and pass on their genes to the next generation. Among Mesoamerican peoples, however, no such phenomenon had occurred, leaving them completely susceptible to the spread of the disease.

The smallpox epidemic is thought to have started in Tenochtitlan just as the Spaniards were leaving. The infection had been spreading in Cuba just as Nervaez had left, and it is thought that one of the men that Cortes had only recently taken on from the second group of Spaniards may have been carrying the illness, allowing it to infect Tenochtitlan. Within only a few weeks, casualties began to mount. The population began to drop, and even those who survived were so occupied with the care of the sick and other such tasks that they were of little use for military endeavors. Tenochtitlan, for the first time since its foundation in 1325, was now weak.

Cuitlahuac was among the victims of the spreading plague, with his reign lasting for a mere 80 days before his death of smallpox. He would be succeeded by his cousin, Cuauhtemoc, who was selected by the remaining nobles as the most suitable replacement. Under

Cuauhtemoc, the Aztec Empire would see its final days, but would resist Cortes and his allies to the best of its abilities. While the smallpox epidemic ran its course in Tenochtitlan, however, the Spanish *conquistador* was readying for yet another attack, this time planning to simply take the city by force and loot all that it had to offer. The Tlaxcalans, already allied to him, made steep demands for their help, including a share of loot from the Aztec capital and freedom from tributes under Spanish rule, which Cortes agreed to. At the same time, Cortes, through Tlaxcalan emissaries, was able to convince other tribes that had lived under the dominion of the Aztec Empire to ally to him. The task was not a difficult one, given the amount of enmity that the Aztec had inspired among many of their subjects. With the smallpox plague ravaging their population and an ever-growing force massing in opposition to them, the Aztec must have appeared to their enemies to be in the most vulnerable position they had ever found themselves in. For those tribes that wished to free themselves from Aztec dominion, this was the best chance that had ever presented itself.

Soon, with a massive confederation of tribes allied against the Aztec Empire (which, interestingly, even included the city-state of Texcoco, a member of the Triple Alliance itself), Cortes began his move back toward Tenochtitlan. Establishing a military base at Texcoco from which he could organize his offensive, Cortes continued to pursue new alliances. By this time, the Tlaxcalans had given him a much larger force to command, probably in excess of 10,000 men, while other

tribes in the area, many of which had been under direct Aztec control, sent forces of their own to fight under Cortes against Tenochtitlan. It was also at this time that Cortes began making the necessary engineering preparations, including the construction of thirteen small boats that could be used to protect his land troops from the water as they advanced over the causeways into Tenochtitlan itself. Before long, Cortes found himself in command of more than 20,000 native troops, plus his own Spanish soldiers equipped with muskets, crossbows, superior armor and, in some cases, horses.

Despite all of these preparations, however, Cortes would not have an easy fight ahead of him. The Aztec, though certainly weakened by the smallpox epidemic that had ripped through Tenochtitlan at unprecedented rates, were still the most militarily powerful group in all of Mesoamerica and would not allow themselves to be defeated easily. The first move Cortes would make in his assault was neither on the city or on the causeways into it, but instead on the ancient Aztec home of Chapultepec. Though the Mexica had been forced from their homes on the hill of Chapultepec centuries before, the springs that had made it an appealing place for settlement just after their arrival at Lake Texcoco after their migration were still one of the main sources for fresh water in Tenochtitlan, to which the water was conveyed by an aqueduct built from wood and stone before being distributed internally to the various parts of the city. Cortes, possibly seeing that a siege was likely to result from his attack on the city, decided to first cut off this supply of fresh water, the one critical external weakness of

the otherwise nearly impervious island city. Fresh water, however, could still be drawn from the spring-fed body of water behind the levee built in the time of Moctezuma I.

With the springs at Chapultepec under his control and a large part of Tenochtitlan's water supply cut off, Cortes could begin his assault on the city. The first phase of this assault was a fairly straightforward attack on one of the causeways that joined Tenochtitlan to the western share of Lake Texcoco by the same force that had cut off the aqueduct from Chapultepec. The taking of the city, however, would not be such a simple matter. The battle would next shift to the water, where the larger boats of the Spaniards would face off against the lighter but more maneuverable and much more numerous canoes that were typically used by the Aztec. During the first engagement on the lake, Cortes was able to defeat a force with a much larger number of canoes than his ships, but still failed to deal any kind of decisive blow to the Aztec resistance.

The situation rapidly degenerated into a long and drawn out siege. For all the military might he had assembled in the form of superior Spanish technology and the army of indigenous tribes eager to rebel against their previous rulers, the Spaniard could not effectively take a city that was so well naturally defended. On the other side, Cuauhtemoc, now almost entirely cut off and without any of the allies that once could have been summoned to Tenochtitlan's aid, could not break through the besieging army and defeat it. Once the siege had

settled in, the Aztec could only resupply the city by canoes sent to other cities around Lake Texcoco, and even these canoes were in severe danger from the Spanish boats patrolling the part of the lake nearest to the island. Before long, conditions in Tenochtitlan would have become nearly unbearable, with little fresh food or clean water available to a population that was only just recovering from the ravages of the smallpox epidemic. Time was now short for the once nearly unstoppable Aztec, as the siege gradually played out to what was almost certainly a foregone conclusion.

A final glimmer of hope appeared to the Aztec toward the end of the siege, when many of the allies of the Spaniards abandoned them. Though the original army had been in excess of 20,000 men, probably just over 1,000 were still available to Cortes by the time the siege of Tenochtitlan was nearing its end. Even better, Cuauhtemoc was even able, through diplomatic emissaries, to convince some of the closest local tribes to launch minor assaults on the Spanish, forcing them to divide their remaining forces between keeping pressure on the causeways leading into Tenochtitlan and defending their own rear against native attackers. At practically any other point in their history, the Aztec almost certainly would have taken full advantage of this change of circumstances and crushed Cortes' depleted force with a direct attack. However, even with the circumstances turning in his favor, Cuauhtemoc was no longer the ruler of the militarily powerful Aztec that had built an empire. Plague, famine and a lack of supplies had taken their toll on the city, leaving Cuauhtemoc in the hopeless

situation of not even being able to exploit weakness in his enemies.

The final stage of the battle would occur in early to mid August of 1521 after nearly three months of ongoing battle between the city's inhabitants and the Spaniards. A fresh shipment of supplies had somewhat strengthened Cortes' force, and the Aztec capital was as weak as it was ever going to be. Gradually, the forces that had fought their way into the outer perimeter of the city from the causeways began advancing toward the central areas. Even though the Aztec were starving and dying, they put up a resistance that would take the Spanish invaders days of nearly continual fighting to break through. Spanish progress was slow, but steady. With each passing day, the Aztec forces found themselves pushed back a bit more toward the city's center.

After days of fighting and dying on both sides, the siege of Tenochtitlan ended on the 13th of August. Cuauhtemoc, with his armies losing ground with each day, had been forced into one of the few areas of the city that the Spaniards had not yet taken. Now, with the result of the battle clearly inevitable, the emperor and what remained of the royal family planned to escape from Tenochtitlan with as much of the imperial treasury as they could take. It is unknown exactly what Cuauhtemoc planned after this, but it is very likely that the money would have been used to raise another army to defeat Cortes later on. If this was the deposed emperor's plan, it would not come to fruition. Cuauhtemoc was captured by Spanish soldiers,

and with his captivity came the end of the war between central Mexico's greatest empire and the colonizing Spaniards.

Illustration 13: An 1899 painting envisaging the events at the end of the siege of Tenochtitlan.

For the next few years, Cuauhtemoc would rule as a puppet of Cortes, much as Moctezuma II had done, though the arrangement was much more formal. The last man ever to have ruled the independent Aztec Empire would die in 1525, hanged as a traitor by the Spanish. Aztec history, from here, can be said to continue only in the very loose sense that the Mexica people and the tribes affiliated with them continued to exist as populations within a Spanish dominated Mexico. Over time, the Spanish would intermarry with some native groups, while many others would remain more or less purely native and become the indigenous peoples that can still be found populating large parts of Mexico today. The arc of the history of the Aztec Empire, however, ends with the conquests of Cortes and the capture of the final *tlatoani* of Tenochtitlan in 1521.

Though brief, the importance of the Aztec Empire within its regional and chronological context was immense. Over the period of less than 200 years between the foundation of Tenochtitlan and its capture by the *conquistadors*, the Aztec built a land empire that united many of the Post-Classical tribes of Mesoamerica, creating a fascinating cultural heritage that was at the same time similar and yet completely unique from the great civilizations of Mesoamerica that had preceded it. Its fall, too, would usher in an important part of Mexico's history, as the end of Aztec resistance would end all hopes of the native peoples being able to drive the Spanish from their territories. As such, the Aztec could truthfully be said to have been the last great native empire of Central America.

Section Five

Tenochtitlan: The Aztec Capital

As the home city of the Mexica and the capital of the Aztec Empire, the history of Tenochtitlan is intimately linked with the history of the Aztec. In its early years shortly after the time in which Tenoch is said to have founded it, the city would almost certainly have simply been one among the many in the vicinity of Lake Texcoco. As Mexica power

grew during their alliance with the Tepanec and in the time of the Triple Alliance, however, the city would expand and be built up into a capital worthy of any historical empire.

By far the most defining characteristic of Tenochtitlan as a city was its location. Being situated on an island in the western part of Lake Texcoco, the city was protected by perhaps the best natural defenses possible. When the city was founded, the island on which it sat was much smaller than it would eventually become. With years of work, however, the Aztec were able to completely transform the small island onto which they had settled by the usage of the *chinampa* system to create new fields, dwelling spaces for the city's population and even large public buildings. By this process of draining and building up new land around the city's originally small natural island, the Aztec could expand their capital as needed, offering them both the protection of island living and an escape from the logistical difficulties that inherently accompany it.

A complex system also joined the island to the mainland around it, allowing the Aztec to move people and necessary resources easily to and from their capital as needed. The two main lifelines between the city and the mainland were aqueducts to bring in fresh water and the causeways that allowed foot traffic to move from Tenochtitlan to the mainland and vice versa. The causeways that joined the Aztec capital to the mainland ran to three different points on the mainland, the towns of Tlacopan, Tepeyac and Ixtapalpa. This arrangement of

bridges was certainly thought out well in advance by the Aztec, as it gave them easy access to several key points on the western shore of the lake that was near to them while allowing them, in theory at least, to bring troops in or lead them out by a variety of different channels in the event that Tenochtitlan ever came under attack, something which no known historical record suggests actually occurred until the Spanish invasion.

Though the city was complex and contained many important sites, none can be regarded as more important than the walled complex surrounding the Templo Mayor. As the center of Aztec religious life, the Templo Mayor in the city of Tenochtitlan (according to Aztec legend, on the spot where the omen that convinced them to settle there was seen) would have had a great significance for any Mexica or Nahua individual, whether living in the city or stationed far away on imperial business. This greatest Aztec temple was dedicated to the worship of two key deities in the Aztec pantheon, Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc (the gods whose idols Moctezuma II feared offending by allowing Cortes to place a cross atop the temple). Like the vast majority of the great civilizations of Mesoamerica, the Aztec preferred a pyramidal form for the platforms on which their temples were built. In the case of the Templo Mayor, a magnificent pyramid whose final version was roughly 200 feet in height was constructed and reconstructed many times over the course of Aztec history, with each new version intended to be grander than the last. At the top of the pyramid were two shrines, one on the north and one on the south side

of the pyramid's top platform. On the south was the shrine of Huitzilopochtli, while the shrine of Tlaloc was to be found to the north.

The sheer importance of the Templo Mayor to Aztec life cannot be underestimated. Far from our modern conception of places of worship, the Aztecs believed that the rites and ceremonies carried out in their temples were essential to maintain order and prosperity (see the section on Aztec religion for more information). However, the great temple only formed one part of the city center, in which both buildings meant for secular and religious purposes could readily be found. More temples, including that of the god Quetzalcoatl, one of the most important Mesoamerican deities whose worship was far from unique to the Aztec, could also be found in the immediate vicinity. This precinct around the temple is also where the priests who ensured the continued worship of the large Aztec pantheon of gods lived, worked and educated the future generations of priests.

Illustration 14: A modern view of an excavated cross section of the Templo Mayor. Note the serpent's head sculpture that may be seen at the center left.

Despite the grandeur and magnificence of the Templo Mayor and the area surrounding it, one gruesome detail has found its way into being among the most popularly thought of in connection with the temple precinct. This is the large rack of skulls that was to once be found within the temple area at the city's center. Known as a *tzompantli*, this type of a skull rack was not unique to the Aztec, and indeed is known to have been used by a number of Mesoamerican civilizations whose religious rites included human sacrifice. However, it is quite likely that the *tzompantli* of Tenochtitlan was the largest (in terms of volume of skulls) example of this practice. While some estimates range well

over 100,000, even the most conservative estimates suggest that there must have been 50,000 or more skulls displayed on the *tzompantli* of the Aztec capital.

Close to the religious center in Tenochtitlan were the palace complexes from which the *tlatoani* governed the Aztec Empire. Of the palaces built by the rulers of Tenochtitlan for themselves, the palace complex of Moctezuma II was by far the grandest. Though its living quarters were, without any doubt, incredibly opulent, the most interesting and unusual feature of this palace complex is the fact that, when in use, it included a complete private set of gardens that housed everything from native animals and birds to tree and plant species. The palace zoo may simply have been a demonstration of the power and wealth of the Aztec emperor, or may have been meant to convey the deeper meaning that Moctezuma II held dominion over all of the areas from which the animals and plants had been brought. Whatever its intended purpose, the menagerie assembled for Moctezuma II must have been massively costly, as both large amounts of labor and resources would have had to go into the feeding and care of the animals that could be found in his household.

Moctezuma II's, however, was not the only palace complex to be found in central Tenochtitlan. West of the Templo Mayor lay the palace complex of Axayacatl, which was simpler than Moctezuma II's, though certainly one of the greatest palaces of the New World at the time.

Beyond the center of the city where the palaces and temples were was to be found was a thriving city that, at its height, is thought to have accommodated roughly a quarter of a million people. Though the city was built in many stages, most of them requiring the building of new *chinampas* to expand the island, what is known of Tenochtitlan's layout betrays a high degree of civic planning on the part of the Aztec. The city was systematically subdivided into various sections of commercial and residential areas. Collectively, these sections made up four districts of the city. In each of these districts, known to the Nahuatl speakers as *calpullis,* there would have been centrally planned and laid out streets and roads, lower levels of civic administration buildings and public markets, which were the blood of Tenochtitlan's thriving commercial life.

It is a common misconception that the island that Tenochtitlan sat on accommodated only one city, for the capital's sister city of Tlatelolco was also located on the same island, to the north of Tenochtitlan. By the time of the Spanish arrival in Mexico, the two cities had both greatly expanded, leaving their outskirts very close to one another. Though Tenochtitlan certainly grew into the greater military and political power and conducted a vast amount of trade of its own in its internal markets, Tlatelolco remained the greater commercial city until the last days of the Aztec Empire. Tlatelolco, with its massive public market in which tens of thousands of people could arrive every day from across the empire to trade, provided a central hub for the

massive amount of goods from distant lands that the creation of the Aztec Empire had allowed to flow into central Mexico. At the height of the Aztec Empire, it is thought that interconnected trade routes may have routinely brought goods from as far away as the American southwest in the north and the distant Inca Empire in the Peruvian Andes to the south to the markets at Tlatelolco.

It is important, in order to truly grasp the size and importance of Tenochtitlan, to understand just how large it was in comparison to other cities around the world at the time when it reached its height. Certainly, at that time, no other city in Mesoamerica could have rivaled it in either geographic size or population. In the Old World, only the great capitals of Europe, fueled by the Renaissance and the wealth flowing into them as the Age of Exploration began, could be said to have been as large as the Aztec capital. Farther to the south, the capital of the Inca Empire, Cusco, accommodated a significant but still smaller population of only about 150,000 residents. Tenochtitlan, therefore, was truly one of the great cities of the world in its time, a fact commented on even by the invading Spaniards who would eventually topple it.

The size, power, wealth and commercial reach of Tenochtitlan would ensure its survival even after the complete destruction of the empire that had founded and expanded it. Owing to its large population and existing administrative authority, the city that had been the capital of the Aztec Empire would eventually come to be the capital of Spanish-

ruled Mexico. Indeed, the site of Tenochtitlan would remain the dominant city of Mexico even through the country's revolution against Spanish colonial rule. Today, the same geographic location that was once ruled by the great Aztec emperors is still the capital of Mexico, known in modern times simply as Mexico city. As we will later see in the section dealing with archaeological finds, the site of Tenochtitlan is so entirely enclosed by modern Mexico city that many major finds have been made within the heart of the modern city.

Section Six

Aztec Myth, Religion and Ritual

Though the Spaniards who first encountered the Aztec may have been very incorrect in their assumption that the Aztec believed them to be gods, they were entirely correct in believing that the mythological and religious beliefs of the Aztec greatly influenced their day to day lives. Accounts from the time of the Spanish invasion, codices of Aztec history and religion from the early colonial period and archaeological finds at the site of Tenochtitlan all point to the singular conclusion that massive amounts of labor and resources (including human life) were devoted to the proper worship of the Aztec gods. No historical overview of this mighty civilization,

therefore, can be considered complete without a simultaneous overview of the religious beliefs that so affected the culture and life of the Aztecs.

The Aztec religion was a heavily polytheistic faith, with specific gods embodying and representing certain elements of the natural world or of human societal interactions (war, for example). In this sense, Aztec religion is structurally very similar to many of the polytheistic traditions of the Old World in ancient times. While some of these gods, such as Huitzilopochtli, were central to Aztec religion from their earliest days, many were adopted from other cultures in the region. Probably the most prominent example of this cultural adoption of gods is the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl, who was worshiped by many civilizations that predate the migration of the Mexica into the Valley of Mexico and was among the most universal Mesoamerican deities.

Like most polytheistic religions from around the globe, the Aztec religion not only assigned certain attributes to various gods, but also included a complex mythological tradition describing the relationships and interactions among the gods. This mythology also formed the basis for some of the religious rituals and ceremonies practiced by the Aztec priests at special festivals throughout the course of the year. Though this mythology is too intricate and long to be fully explored in a short historical work such as this, we will now dedicate ourselves to a basic exploration of the Aztec view of the major gods and their roles

before beginning our discussion of the practices of worship. A more comprehensive list of gods may be found in the appendices at the end of the book.

Aztec mythology, like almost all other religious mythologies, begins with an origin myth about the creation of the universe and of mankind. This story begins with the self-creation of Ometeotl, the original god and first creator god of the Aztec pantheon. The nature of this deity is a matter of much dispute among modern scholars. Most sources describe Ometeotl as a god of duality, representing both the positive and negative natures of any given attribute (good and evil, as an example). This interpretation of the nature of Ometeotl suggests that this god was an all-embodying god that transcended any singular nature. This concept, however, has been criticized in more modern times for having been too much influenced by the ideas of the Christians who were largely responsible for creating the surviving accounts of Aztec religion. Whether or not this dualistic and all-encompassing nature is an accurate representation of the Aztec theological ideas associated with Ometeotl, it is still safe to identify this deity as the primary creator god of Aztec religion.

Following the self-creation of Ometeotl, the creator god also created four more principle gods of the Aztec pantheon. These four were Xipe Totec, an agricultural deity associated with springtime and fertility, Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun and primary Aztec war god, Quetzalcoatl, the god who would go on to create mankind, and

Tezcatlipoca, the god of night, darkness and magic. These four gods, once created by Ometeotl, would take over the original creator god's role as the primary creators of the physical world.

Like many ancient origin traditions, the Aztec mythological system proposes the existence of a sort of primeval sea or ocean predating the Earth and the beings that inhabit it. In the particular case of Aztec mythology, this ocean was inhabited by a gigantic crocodilian monster called Cipactli. This monster inhibited the ability of the four gods that Ometeotl had created to continue on with creation, as everything that they brought into existence was eaten and destroyed by Cipactli. In order to go forward with the creation of the universe, therefore, these gods would have to do away with the monster. They managed to defeat it, at which point the many parts of the universe that it had swallowed after they had been created returned by Cipactli's stomach, while its body became the Earth itself. It was also at this point that the Aztec pantheon grew beyond the four principle gods and Ometeotl, as many of the other gods had been created and eaten by Cipactli. With the monster gone, this third generation of gods was now free to act upon the continued creation and governance of the universe.

Illustration 15: The monster Cipactli, here stylized as a day sign of the Aztec calendar.

After the creation of the Earth, the gods created the sun. In order to create something of such magnitude, a god would actually have to become the sun itself, rather than simply bring it into existence. The first god to become the sun was Tezcatlipoca. During this time period, known in the myth as the First Sun, the first human-like inhabitants of the Earth, a race of giants, were created by the gods. This age, however, is said to have come to an abrupt end when Quetzalcoatl became jealous of Tezcatlipoca for his important role as the sun. According to the myth, Quetzalcoatl knocked Tezcatlipoca out of the

sky, ending his reign as the sun. This event also brought the first habitation of the Earth to a close, as Tezcatlipoca, also the god associated with jaguars, took his revenge by sending jaguars to kill the giants that the gods had created to populate Earth.

The Second Sun period would begin when Quetzalcoatl became the sun. A new race of people was also created to replace the giants, this time normal humans. However, these humans are said to have fallen out of favor due to failing to worship and honor the gods properly. Though Quetzalcoatl was not ready to dispense with them, Tezcatlipoca, again in an antagonistic role, is said to have turned all of the second race of humans into monkeys to punish them. Enraged, Quetzalcoatl created a worldwide hurricane to destroy the transformed humans rather than allow them to continue to live as monkeys. The feathered serpent would then remove himself from the position of the sun in order to try to create yet another race.

The Third Sun period began when Tlaloc, a third generation god who was the deity presiding over rain and water, took Quetzalcoatl's place as the sun. Like the preceding two sun periods, the Third Sun would ultimately be ended by the actions of Tezcatlipoca. Xochiquetzal, the wife of Tlaloc, would be seduced into infidelity by Tezcatlipoca. When Tlaloc discovered the treachery of his wife, he grieved endlessly and failed to properly perform his role as the rain god. As a result, the world became parched, and the humans prayed desperately for rain. The prayers only served to annoy the already vexed Tlaloc, who

subsequently answered them by sending a fiery rain, destroying not only the people but the Earth itself before it was finished. With this, the Third Sun period and Tlaloc's reign as the sun ended.

After Tlaloc's destruction, the gods would recreate the Earth and mankind and the role of the sun would be taken by his new wife, the goddess Chalchiuhtlicue. Yet again, this Fourth Sun would be ended by Tezcatlipoca when he insulted the goddess who had taken over what had originally been his position. Chalchiuhtlicue is said to have been so saddened by Tezcatlipoca's words that she cried tears of blood down onto the Earth for more than half a century, drowning the restored human race.

The Fifth Sun, which the Aztec identified as the era in which they themselves lived, would see the rise of the god Huitzilopochtli as the new sun god. After the accidental destruction of man by Chalchiuhtlicue, Quetzalcoatl recovered the skeletons of the destroyed human race from the underworld and made a sacrifice of his own blood to bring them back to life. To the Aztec, this myth,, collectively known as the Five Suns, explained the existence and state of the world in which they lived. It also served as a basis for some of their rituals. Quetzalcoatl's blood sacrifice, for example, illustrates the idea that blood was the basis of life for both humans and gods, probably a very basic concept behind the human sacrifice conducted by the Aztec.

The end of the myth also mentions an ongoing war between

Huitzilopochtli as the current sun and the gods and goddesses making up the stars. The Aztec believed that power and strength could be conveyed to gods by means of human blood sacrifice, and so routine sacrifices were made to Huitzilopochtli to ensure that he would not lose this cosmic war. This is also very likely why one of the two deities to whom the Templo Mayor was dedicated was Huitzilopochtli, as he was one of the gods that the Aztec believed required the most frequent human sacrifice.

This concept of pleasing and strengthening the gods via sacrifice, however, was far from exclusive to the Aztec sun god. Special festivals throughout the year would be taken as occasions to offer up human lives to specific gods in order to be sure that the gods were pleased and that the universe that had come to be during the time of the Fifth Sun would continue to maintain its balance. Sacrifices to Tezcatlipoca, in particular, were considered quite important, as the god of darkness had so often been responsible for the destruction of the Earth and its inhabitants before.

Illustration 16: A codex image depicting a human sacrifice. Note the heart clearly shown separated from the body of the victim (upper left). Scenes such as this would have been common at the Templo Mayor and other Aztec temples.

Out of this need to appease Tezcatlipoca was born one of the most important and interesting festivals of the Aztec religious year, the *Toxcatl*. Although the festival itself occurred only once a year, the ceremonies associated with it actually continued for the entire year leading up to the festival itself. For the year between any two *Toxcatl* festivals, a young man would be selected to impersonate Tezcatlipoca. During the year, he

would live lavishly, being treated as the embodiment of the most feared god of the Aztec pantheon. At the *Toxcatl*, he would be ritually sacrificed and eaten by the leading nobles of Tenochtitlan, including the reigning *tlatoani*. Taking part in the feast on the flesh of the impersonator would also be whoever had been selected to take his place for the coming year. Thus, an embodiment of Tezcatlipoca would always live among the Aztec, being accommodated in a lifestyle that was otherwise exclusive to the ruler and a handful of leading nobles before ultimately being offered up to the god at the annual festival.

Another festival of massive importance to the Aztec occurred not every year, but every 52 years. This period of time, though certainly a long one, was significant to the Aztec because it represented one full cycle in their calendar. When one cycle ended, it was believed that a specific ceremony, known as the Ceremony of New Fire, had to be performed in order to usher in the next one and prevent time from stopping with the end of a cycle. To celebrate this festival, the Aztec priests assigned to the cult of Huehueteotl (the Aztec god of both time and fire) would carry out a ritual human sacrifice at a temple atop an extinct volcano outside the city of Tenochtitlan. While the sacrifice was being performed, every fire in Tenochtitlan, including the sacred fires at the various temples, would be put out to symbolize the ending of the calendar cycle. A fire would then be struck by drilling against the bones of the sacrificial victim until sparks could be generated to ignite tinder. The resulting fire was then used to relight the sacred

temple fires, and the fires in homes and other private buildings could be reignited. The new fire symbolized the beginning of the new cycle, which would continue for another 52 years until the ceremony was repeated.

From the descriptions we have seen of Aztec religious life, it is clear that human sacrifice played a massive role in the religious activities of Mexico during the time of Aztec rule. Human sacrifice was far from a new development in Mesoamerica by the time the Aztecs came to power, as many earlier civilizations had practiced it extensively long before the establishment of Tenochtitlan. Quite possibly because of the large empire and the population that was at their disposal, however, the Aztec were by far the most prolific group when it came to ritualized human sacrifice. Human sacrifice, in many forms, had its roots in Aztec mythology. As we have already seen, blood played a critical role in the Aztec creation myth as the medium by which Quetzalcoatl resurrected the human race for the final time. Other myths, too, influenced the Aztec predisposition toward ritual murder. One example is a part of the myth of the battle between the sun god Huitzilopochtli and his sister Coyolxauhqui. According to the myth, Huitzilopochtli dismembered his sister. A large stone disk showing the severed body of Coyolxauhqui has been found at the bottom of the steps leading up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli at the Templo Mayor. Parts of female human remains found nearby have led archaeologists and historians to believe that the Aztec reenacted the defeat of Coyolxauhqui by ritually sacrificing a young woman and

dismembering her in the same way as Huitzilopochtli did his sister.

Many parallel practices also existed in conjunction with the practice of human sacrifice in the religious activities of the Aztec. Among these, we have already seen examples in which dismemberment and cannibalism come into play after the sacrifice. Another practice which was at certain times employed was that of flaying the skin of a victim. This practice was particularly associated with the worship of the agricultural god Xipe Totec, who was almost always depicted as wearing a suit and mask of flayed human skin, thought to represent the new flesh of the earth with the coming of spring and the growing season. Priests, therefore, would sometimes skin sacrificial victims and wear their skin on special festival dates in honor of Xipe Totec.

Another key component of Aztec religious life was the traditional Mesoamerican ball game. This game involved a large rubber ball that would be projected among two teams of players by bouncing it off of the hips or limbs. The goal, in most cases, was to put the ball through a relatively small stone ring on the side of the ball court, thus scoring. The ball game is a fascinating example of cultural spread of a single idea over a long period of time and throughout large geographic regions, Many scholars believe that the game may have originated with the ancient Olmec civilization, one of the earliest advanced civilizations in the Americas. To the Aztec, however, human sacrifice and the ball game, known to them as *ollamalitzli,* were intimately linked.

The Aztec version of the game was likely thought of as a type of symbolic combat, possibly representing the eternal cosmic war between Huitzilopochtli as the sun and the deities who represented the stars. As such, the losing team (in some cases only its leader) would be sacrificed to the gods as a ritual offering. However, there is much evidence to suggest that this aspect of the game only came into play during religious festivals and that it was played widely as a recreational sport in other circumstances. Indeed, some scholars have even hypothesized the existence of professional or semi-professional players of the game based on its seeming prestige and importance in Aztec society and the rich rewards that were bestowed on the winning teams.

Though the practices of human sacrifice, cannibalism and flaying may seem extremely barbaric and even shocking to our modern sensibilities, it is important to evaluate them in the cultural context in which they occurred. To the Aztecs, these practices were anything but senseless death and violence. Rather, the proper sacrifices and other practices associated with sacrifice were believed to maintain the balance of the universe and earn the continued favor of the gods. Furthermore, the belief in human sacrifices as victims may not truly reflect the cultural beliefs widely held in Mesoamerica at the time. Much like many other societies, the Aztec believed in both a heaven and an underworld to which the souls of the dead might be sent. Those who died of natural causes were widely believed to have had to

pass through the underworld, whereas some of those who died in war or were sacrificed were believed to have gone on to the heavens to serve the gods and, in the case of the sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli, join the great cosmic battle to keep the sun in the sky. This cultural view may also be indicated by the wide ranging societal groups from which sacrifices could be brought. Though prisoners of war were by far the most common, full citizens of the Aztec Empire, native Aztecs of Tenochtitlan and even Aztec nobility could find themselves sacrificed on the altar stones of the temples. As such, it may well be that the Aztec saw becoming a human sacrifice as a more honorable fate than many today might suppose.

Section Seven

Aztec Society: The Daily of Life of the Aztecs and Their Subjects

Though the imperial ambitions and religious life of the Aztecs may seem to be the most prominent aspects of the Aztec society, it is also important to recognize the day to day manner in which the empire was governed and the ways in which society functioned. Though sometimes thought of as primitive, the Aztec society was actually

quite complex in comparison to many early civilizations, making it an interesting and unique example of societal development in Mesoamerica.

The basic class of Aztec society were agrarian peasants, known as *macehualtin* in the Nahuatl language. Farmers, however, could occupy many different positions within their class. Some became wealthy by farming land that they themselves owned outright, while others paid a tenant fee to the noble owners of large areas of farmland in order to be allowed to work it, a system very similar to the serf system in feudalistic Europe. Even farmers, therefore, had some range of social mobility within the Aztec class system, a feature that set it apart from many contemporary civilizations.

Above the farmers were a wealthy class of merchants, skilled craftsmen, artisans and other professionals with highly specialized and valuable skill sets. Artisans, in particular, enjoyed positions of great prominence in the Aztec societal structure, a fact evidenced by the assignment of the word *tolteca* (the word literally referring to the greatly honored Toltec civilization) to refer to the craftsmen of the Aztec. Merchants, too, found themselves in a position of great importance. With the massive trade networks that the Aztec seized and established through conquests, a massive class of private merchants was needed to bring goods from the far reaches of the empire and from the trade routes that stretched beyond it to the markets of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco. Without this crucial

commercial class, the movement of wealth in the Aztec Empire would have been greatly impaired. As new trade routes opened up and more goods became available, this merchant class also grew very wealthy, controlling much of the business in the empire.

Above all other classes were the *pipiltin*, or the noble class. These nobles were the leaders and rulers of Aztec society, as well as the major land-owning class. The nobles occupied the top positions in the military and the government, allowing them to keep a tight control over the empire. Though a type of monarchy, the Aztec Empire also functioned as an oligarchy, with the leading nobles confirming the new *tlataoni* after the death of a previous one. This system, though far from democratic, did help to ensure that the most able of the top candidates for the overall rule of the empire would be selected, a notable improvement over such systems as simply offering the monarchy to the first born child of the previous ruler. In this sense, the government of the Aztec Empire mirrored more the Roman Empire's system of having both an emperor and a senate that confirmed the emperor than the succession systems of many other ancient and medieval civilizations.

Another, much less formal class existed in the form of Aztec slaves. Though the Aztec did practice slavery, it should be noted that their form of the institution is very different from what most people today think of as slavery. Though technically property, slaves in the Aztec Empire had much broader rights than slaves in almost any other society in human history. Privileges such as owning property and having proper recourse to Aztec law and justice were extended to slaves, and many opportunities existed for slaves to gain their freedom. It was not an uncommon occurrence for slaves to be released when their masters died, and children who were born to a slave were, rather surprisingly, considered to be free citizens of the empire, rather than slaves themselves. Almost all Aztec slaves were formerly free people who had committed crimes and been sentenced to slavery or had accumulated debts they had been unable to pay, in which case they would become slaves to their creditors. In this sense, slavery among the Aztec was actually more akin to the concept of indentured servitude in Europe than slavery as it is traditionally thought of.

Though the class system was somewhat rigid, opportunity for advancement to the lower and middle classes was available in the form of priesthood and through prestigious military service. The priestly class was open to candidates from any walk of life, from the peasantry to the nobility, and provided a degree of social mobility very analogous to the institution of priesthood in Europe during the Middle Ages. Though nobles were usually selected for the highest religious positions, people of common background entering the

priesthood could rise to occupy one of the most important roles in Aztec society. Because of financial support given to the temples by the state, entry into the priesthood also guaranteed a fairly high degree of economic stability, as the needs of the priests were always carefully provided for.

The governing of the Aztec Empire was, of course, managed directly from Tenochtitlan, but many other centers of regional power were needed to properly administer an empire so large. For this purpose, the Aztec rulers appointed governors to rule over the various lands that had been incorporated into their empire. These governors were responsible for maintaining order in the lands under their supervision and, most importantly, were expected to see to it that the regularly scheduled tribute payments to Tenochtitlan continued to flow. In the earlier years of the Aztec Empire, these governors were mostly the kings of the tribes and cities that had ruled prior to Aztec conquest. Later on, however, the power of the subservient states was reduced by placing above these native governors a superstructure of Aztec provincial rulers so as to more closely control the empire and decrease the likelihood of rebellions. As an added incentive, governors and their provinces were often paid a share of the tributes from regions conquered later on, giving the provinces of the Aztec Empire an economic reason to remain peaceful and stable.

The home life of the Aztecs was principally centered around the raising of a family whose members would grow into productive

citizens of the empire, helping it to function and grow. Until the age of 15, children were under the tutelage of their parents, who were expected to instill basic values such as socially acceptable morals and behaviors and a loyalty to the state into their children. At the age of 15, however, this role in the life of male children was taken over by the state itself. All male Aztec children were expected to attend a type of public school in which they would receive lessons dealing with everything from vocational training to help them in their future careers to the theology and mythology of the Aztec religion. During this schooling, the children would also learn the basics of military life, as common people acting as volunteers and conscripts made up the majority of the Aztec fighting force (though the elite troops were professional soldiers). Upon exiting these public schools, which were known as *telpochcallli*, the young men of the Aztec Empire would have been prepared for effective and productive life as members of their society.

Besides the *telpochcalli*, which were more common public schools, a special set of schools existed for training the children of the nobility and other elite members of society. Though the topics covered were often very similar in these schools to those of the commoners, the lessons were more in-depth and were intended to prepare children to take over the roles of their fathers as the leaders of the Aztec society. These more advanced schools for the nobility were called *calmecac*, and replaced the vocational curriculum of the *telpochcalli* with lessons on the governing of peoples and provinces, as these were the roles

expected to be taken on by their students.

Yet another set of schools existed for those who wished to pursue military careers. Although both the *telpochcalli* and the *calmecac* trained their students in the military arts, this third set of schools, called *cuicacalli*, were structured to produce young men who were closer to professional soldiers to push Aztec power into an ever-growing expanse of territory and to maintain order with martial force when needed. The *cuicacalli* was a school open to the commoners, and was considered the basic alternative to the *telpochcalli*, which was more focused on general and vocational education.

Girls in Aztec society were generally given less regard in education than their male counterparts, especially among the common people. Female children of the lower classes would be educated by their mothers in the home, usually being taught skills that would allow them to someday maintain their own home and raise children. Female children of the nobility, on the other hand, had slightly greater advantages when it came to education. Though they were still not given the rigorous education of their brothers, girls from noble families did receive rudimentary education in religious and historical matters. Though women were often second-class citizens, they could, like the male children, rise above their normal rank by entry into the priesthood, which accepted women as priestesses for the worship of certain gods and goddesses. Once again, we see that the Aztec priesthood provided social mobility that was largely lacking in many

other sections of the society.

Despite the strength of the Aztec state, the home and family were always considered important in Aztec culture as basic units of the society. Because of this, marriage was keenly encouraged among the Aztec at all class levels, with the goal of a successful marriage being to produce many offspring who would, in turn, serve the state productively and produce children of their own. Marrying and breeding young was also critically important for retaining population, as the young men of Tenochtitlan and the rest of the empire were frequently called upon to join military campaigns. The near-constant state of warfare that expanded Aztec power from a very regional influence in the Texcoco basin to the dominant power in Mesoamerica would, by necessity, have claimed the lives of many of the society's younger men, making it important for those men to fulfill their duties as fathers to Aztec children as early on in their lives as possible.

The growing wealth and power of the Aztec Empire also allowed Aztec citizens, particularly those living in Tenochtitlan itself, to enjoy a degree of prosperity that was uncommon in Mesoamerica at the time. This material prosperity, aside from simply providing more resources and wealth, also influenced the way in which the Aztecs lived. One of the most prominent examples of this increased prosperity and its affect on daily life came in the seemingly mundane form of Aztec bathing practices. Compared to other civilizations before relatively recent history, the Aztecs bathed incredibly

frequently, with many taking up to two baths per day in order to remain clean. Generally, water carried by aqueduct from the springs at Chapultepec was preferred for these baths. Most Aztecs living in Tenochtitlan also had small outbuildings attached to their homes for steam baths, which were used for cleaning and were also believed to have spiritual benefits.

The common food choices of the Aztec, too, reflected the prosperous society in which they lived. The typical Aztec diet is believed to have been widely varied, probably contributing to a healthy and well-nourished overall population. As in many civilizations in North and Central America, corn was a basic staple used to provide a cheap and plentiful grain base for many foods. However, the Aztecs had access to fish, waterfowl, various squashes, peppers, wild game and other diverse foodstuffs that added both nutritional variety and flavor to their diets. The Aztec also harvested the cocoa bean and used it as a seasoning, as well as to make a spiced chocolate drink that was a favorite treat in Tenochtitlan and throughout the empire.

Despite this economic prosperity and abundance, most Aztec homes were relatively simple, built from the adobe material frequently used throughout the Americas as a plentiful resource for constructing basic buildings. Homes would usually be divided into common living areas with a rectangular floor plan. Like many of the ancient civilizations of the world, the Aztecs made use of thatched roofs, which provided adequate protection from the elements while still being simple to

construct and light enough that little additional structural support was needed. Noble families, of course, lived much more lavishly thanks to their greater resources, often having much larger and finer homes built from quarried stone. For the majority of the Aztec people, however, the simple adobe and thatch home was sufficient.

In a society that was so dominated by religious belief, it is clearly to be expected that the Aztec had a strict moral system. This system of morality, which was instilled in every Aztec child from a young age, was one of the principle drivers of social interaction among the Aztec. Somewhat surprisingly, this moral framework was not so different from a Western view as might be supposed from the differences between the two cultures. Honor, honesty, charity and other such moral values usually regarded as positive in Western cultures held just as much sway among the Aztec. The inconsistency between these similar sets of morals and the massive breach between them when it came to the Aztecs' seeming disregard for human life has made for many interesting debates about the difference between the two philosophical systems.

In all likelihood, every nuance of Aztec life will probably never be understood due to the abruptness of the interruption in that life that the Spanish invasion of Mexico caused. Much of what we know today is also sourced from accounts written by Spanish friars who were present in Mexico during and slightly after the invasion. Though no small amount of credit is due to these men for their role in preserving

so much of the history and culture of the Aztec, it is also certain that, not fully understanding that culture, they portrayed it through a Western lens as best they could. Certainly much of what they recorded is accurate, but it is also very likely that there are also details and nuances to the finer points of Aztec culture that have most likely been lost to history.

Section Eight

The Aztec Military: The Force that Built an Empire

Though other aspects of Aztec life may be more culturally important, the Aztec army was the key to the creation of the Aztec Empire as a political entity. Without its massive military force, Tenochtitlan would never have been able to successfully seize and hold the huge amounts of territory that it did.

When the Aztec military was on campaign or engaged in battle, the bulk of the armies were made up of common people from the lower echelons of society. However, even these commoners were fairly effective warriors, as all male children who attended schools in the

Aztec Empire would have received at least rudimentary military education, giving them the basic skill sets needed to fight well and maintain order and discipline in real combat situations. However, these soldiers would have not been sufficient to achieve the great conquests made by the Aztec Empire without their leaders and superiors, the elite professional soldiers of the Aztec military.

Above the common ranks, there existed highly skilled units of warriors that were the guiding force of the Aztec army. The most prominent of these units were the Eagle and Jaguar warrior groups, elite forces made up of those who had proven themselves as the best soldiers in Aztec society at any given time. Collectively, these two forces were known as the *cuauhoceletl* to Nahuatl speakers. Entry into the ranks of these units was granted based on the number of prisoners of war a warrior could capture (as we will discuss shortly, this was of massive importance in Aztec military life). Those who wished to become eligible as candidates for the Eagle or Jaguar units would have to capture a minimum of 12 prisoners in the course of two consecutive major battles. Such a high and strict requirement kept the units lean and effective, being made up of only the most successful and effective soldiers.

Illustration 17: Image showing the Aztec military elite. Note the eagle and jaguar garb, denoting the two different elite groups.

In Aztec society, entry into one of these elite units was considered one of the greatest honors possible. Though nobles were commonly members, the *cuauhoceletl* did not require noble birth as a prerequisite for membership. Indeed, promotion into the ranks of the Eagle and Jaguar units was a method of social advancement that was open to any common soldier who could prove himself worthy. Perhaps even more so than the priesthood, such military promotions allowed common people to rise above their class rank. A man who became one of the elite professional soldiers of the Aztec army was granted a sort of low-level nobility, regardless of the class of his birth. These

warriors were granted greater benefits than conscript soldiers, and also achieved a high degree of stability because their employment was full-time and furnished directly by the state. So highly regarded were the members of these professional units that they would even be hosted at the homes of the nobility and at the royal palaces themselves at special feasts and festivals, honors that ordinary commoners could never have hoped to achieve.

The Eagle and Jaguar soldiers also demonstrate an interesting facet of Aztec military life, which is a certain degree of psychological warfare. True to their names, soldiers of both of these units would go into battle clothed in a manner representative of their respective animals. Eagle warriors would typically wear garments lined with feathers and, in some cases, the skins, feathers and even beaks of real eagles to both denote their rank and to frighten their opponents. Similarly, the Jaguar warriors entered combat wearing the skins of jaguars. Such elaborate and unusual battle gear, especially to armies that had never encountered the Aztec before, would certainly have had a shocking effect and given the elite Aztec warriors a slight psychological advantage.

Though the Eagle and Jaguar warriors were the elites of the Aztec military, the lower ranks also had their own hierarchy. In most cases, the warriors who eventually joined the top units would progress along the various steps of this hierarchy, though it was possible to advance quickly enough to skip stages of it. The rank of all Aztec warriors was

ultimately determined by the number of prisoners they had captured, as war captives were favored as human sacrifices to the Aztec gods. Such was the importance attached to capturing enemies that warriors were discouraged from killing their foes if capture was possible, as the death of an opponent on the battlefield deprived the empire of a potential sacrifice.

Armor among the Aztec soldiers was light, both because of the lack of iron or bronze working and because of the extremely hot climates Aztec warriors typically had to contend with. Typically, shields and some types of armor were carved from wood. Though such defenses would have been thoroughly useless in the Old World, where functional metalworking had been practiced for millennia, it was fairly effective against the offensive technologies that the Aztec army would have encountered in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Another rather ingenious type of armor used by the Aztecs was a type of hard armor made from salt in a fabric matrix. Absorbent garments made from woven cotton would be soaked in highly concentrated salt water, allowing them to absorb the dissociated salt. When the garments were dried under the hot sun, the crystals would reform as solids inside the fabric of the garment, resulting in a hardened cotton armor that could protect a warrior against some attacks.

Many different types of offensive weapons found their use in Aztec warfare. Some, such as spears, clubs, maces, stone daggers, bows, and slingshots are weapons typical of almost any early civilization because

of how readily they suggest themselves to those working with stone and other simple materials. Other offensive weapons used by the Aztecs, however, were much more unique. Most prominent among these is a weapon known as a *macuahuitl*. This strange melee weapon took the place of the sword in Mesoamerican combat, and was composed of a flattened wooden plank to which small rectangular pieces of obsidian, honed to a razor-like sharpness, were attached. The material properties of obsidian made this weapon sharper than any contemporary metal blade, allowing it to be used to devastating effectiveness by Aztec warriors. Sadly, no authentic specimens of the *macuahuitl* remain in existence today. The only one known to have been recovered for preservation was returned to Spain, where it remained for over 300 years until being destroyed in a fire in the 1880s. Modern reconstructions of the weapon make use of drawings of this one authentic specimen and images in Aztec codices for reference in construction and dimensions.

As the Aztec Empire grew, so too did its military obligations. A long-standing military tradition dating back to the time when Mexica mercenaries were utilized by the Tepanec for campaigns combined with a large population in and around Tenochtitlan allowed for large and effective armies to be raised very quickly whenever a threat arose or a new conquest was being planned by the emperor. A need also existed for garrisons in some provinces of the empire, ensuring that a force could quickly be mobilized against revolts. By the time of the Spanish arrival in Mexico, the Aztec Empire was a state rife with

opposition to the rule of Tenochtitlan, held together only by the sheer power of one of the greatest military powers the New World had ever produced.

Section Nine

Art and Technology in the Aztec Empire

The disparity between the level of advancement of European societies and those of Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish conquest has, in some instances, led to the depiction of the Aztec (among other contemporary groups) as somewhat technologically primitive. Though it is true that the Aztecs did not possess the same technologies as the Spanish, particularly in the field of functional metallurgy, it would also not be balanced or accurate to ignore the very real and rather remarkable technological and artistic accomplishments of the Aztec civilization.

An area of great achievement in both artistic and technological matters in Aztec civilization was pottery and ceramics. Like most New World civilizations (the notable exception being the early Peruvian civilization that inhabited the city of Caral), the Aztecs used ceramics

widely for both utilitarian and decorative purposes. Ceramic objects have also played an important archaeological role in the study of the Aztec civilization, as they are among the most common objects found at Aztec sites. In many cases, even very mundane and utilitarian objects, such as pots and dishes, displayed a high degree of artistic design, with fine patterns often being worked into the ceramic piece itself and paints or glazes being used to add a more aesthetically pleasing touch.

Ceramics were also used in manners that were less functional and more decorative. Ceramic figurines and sculptures, for example, are known to have been fairly common. Such pieces of artwork drew heavily on earlier Maya and Toltec influences, but were made in a style that was unique to the Aztecs. The Aztec, as sculptors, were also masters of stone carving, creating finely laid out and executed masterpieces of artwork that, though in very different styles, would have rivaled even the great Renaissance sculptors of Europe in intricacy and skill. Among the finest examples of this sculpting tradition are the various Aztec altar stones and other temple sculptures that have been recovered to date.

Though functional metallurgy, such as working in iron or bronze to produce objects for everyday use, was not practiced by the Aztec, it would be incorrect to say that they did not have a certain facility with the working of metals. In the case of the Aztecs, metal, primarily gold and silver, was worked for decorative purposes, rather than for

functional ones. Jewelry was among the primary uses of precious metals in Aztec society, a fact that may have resulted in the Spanish massacre of the Aztec elite present at the *Toxcatl* festival while Cortes was away from Tenochtitlan. Contemporary European sources remark on the quality of the Aztec goldsmithing, suggesting that it was of a quality even higher than most European craftsmen could have produced. Unfortunately for modern researchers, gold was seen as more valuable than specimens from other civilizations, and so all of the gold secured by the Spanish in Mesoamerica was melted down to be reused, forever destroying what was doubtlessly some of the most incredible artwork of the New World. Only a handful of specimens of Aztec jewelry are known to survive today (see Fisherman's Treasure in the next section for more information).

Even though metallurgy of a functional nature was not practiced by the Aztec, it should be clearly understood that the stone tools that they created were highly advanced. A fascinating 2003 study of the now largely drained lakebed of Lake Texcoco recovered a treasure trove of ancient tools that demonstrate the high level of skill of Aztec craftsmen working with various stone materials. Obsidian, in particular, found a great degree of usage as a replacement for the sharp metal objects that other civilizations around the world would have been using for centuries by the time the Aztec Empire came into being. Abundantly available obsidian and advanced skills in working it into extremely fine points and edges, it seems, almost completely made up for the lack of metalworking in Mesoamerica at this time.

Like many ancient and classical civilizations, the Aztec had a more thorough understanding of the sciences than is generally expected. Medicine, in particular, was developed by the Aztecs, who were skilled in the treatment of many common diseases. Several codices show a fairly high level of medical understanding on the part of the Aztecs, in particular in treatments using various herbs. However, like most pre-modern civilizations, the Aztec also came to many ill-informed and supernatural conclusions about medical matters. A distinct example of this can be seen in a document known as the Codex Vaticanus, in which relationships between various parts and systems of the human body are connected to astrological concepts, a mistake also made by European physicians in early times.

By far, however, the greatest achievements of the Aztec came in the realms of architecture and engineering, two studies that had to be mastered in order to create the vast city of Tenochtitlan. Much of this technical mastery was certainly inherited from other cultures in the area, as we see them reach a high level of development very early on with the creation of the first *chinampas* at Tenochtitlan in the early 14th century. Over time, however, the Aztecs built on this borrowed knowledge, much of which was likely the result of remaining Mayan and Toltec influence in central Mexico, to create their own highly advanced systems of architecture and engineering. The result of this growth in technical ability was the infrastructure that allowed the city of Tenochtitlan to function despite its massive size. Large public areas,

complex city planning, the causeways and aqueducts that connected the island to its surroundings and even the various expanding levels of the Templo Mayor itself are all testaments to the marvels of engineering that the Aztecs were capable of by the time they reached their height.

Section Ten

Aztec Archaeological Finds and Sites

Though much of what we know about the Aztec today comes from written material compiled by the Spanish, physical evidence also plays a key part in understanding this remarkable Central American empire. Despite so much of the Aztec heritage having been destroyed during Spain's rule of Mexico, many important archaeological finds have been made over the years that have shed light on various aspects of Aztec life. Following will be descriptions of some of the most major and important of these finds. Although these finds have been selected for being of particular importance, it should be noted that this list is far from a comprehensive survey of Aztec archaeology, which is a massive field of modern archaeological study.

Tizoc Stone- Among the most remarkable of the finds from the

Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan is the Tizoc Stone, a massive cylindrical altar stone carved from a single piece of basalt. The stone, which shows an intricate relief sculpture of a group of Aztec warriors taking prisoners in war, is one of the finest examples of Aztec art still in existence today. Many theories have been offered as to the stone's specific usage, though almost all modern historians agree that it probably served some kind of ritual function in one of the sacrificial ceremonies performed by the Aztec. The leading theory is that a specific ritual of ceremonial combat was performed on the stone, in which a victim would be lashed to the top of it and made to attempt to fight off a group of the elite Jaguar warriors with little more than a small club covered in feathers. Others have suggested that it was simply a platform atop which the more usual sacrifices would be conducted.

Illustration 18: An early photograph of the Tizoc Stone

The stone remained undiscovered for over 250 years after the Spanish conquest. It was uncovered accidentally, like many finds at the former site of Tenochtitlan, in the late 18th century, and has remained in museum hands ever since. The stone is also widely recognized, along with the Aztec Calendar Stone (see below), as one of the most well-known artifacts recovered from the world of the pre-colonial Aztecs.

Teopanzalco- Teopanzalco is a ceremonial and religious center defined mainly by a pyramid that archaeological researchers designate as Building 1 at the site. Building 1, sometimes also called the Great Platform, mirrored the Templo Mayor in Tenochtitlan in terms of supporting two temples, one to Tlaloc and one to Huitzilopochtli. A series of other platforms throughout the site demonstrate the existence of temples and shrines to other gods of the Aztec pantheon at Teopanzalco. The site is thought to have come under Aztec control during the conquests of Moctezuma I. However, the temples to the Aztec gods were almost certainly already complete, as the inhabitants of the site are believed to have been another Nahua group related to the Mexica, meaning that they very likely would have worshiped a similar pantheon of gods.

The Fisherman's Treasure- A find of the most extraordinary luck, the so-called Fisherman's Treasure has provided modern researchers with a rare look at Aztec golden ornaments, almost all of which were melted down by the Spanish after the conquest. The horde

of golden objects was discovered by a fisherman north of Veracruz in coastal shallows in 1976. The man who found the objects was later arrested on a charge of antiquities theft, having sold some of the find. Much of the treasure, however, was recovered. Among the golden objects that were found were several pieces of Aztec jewelry predating the Spanish invasion, the only known artifacts of their kind still surviving. Among the objects recovered were pendants showing eagle-like features in their design. Some historians believe that these pendants may have been part of the ceremonial dress of the elite Eagle warriors.

Aztec Calendar Stone- If there is a single best-known artifact of the Aztec civilization, that object must without any serious doubt be identified as the Aztec Calendar Stone. The stone represents the intricate and precise Aztec calendar system of the era in which the Aztecs believed they lived, as well as the times of the four previous eras described in the Five Suns myth. The various eras are shown on concentric circles centered around a depiction of the god Tonatiuh.

Illustration 19: The famous Aztec Calendar Stone

The stone was discovered in the late 18th century, very close to the time at which the Tizoc Stone was found not far from its resting place. After its discovery, it was displayed on the wall of a cathedral in Mexico City for nearly a century before eventually being properly introduced to a museum collection. The exact purpose of the stone is a matter about which there is much debate and little conclusive evidence. The sheer size of the stone would seem to suggest that it was intended to function as more than a simple calendar, as such a calendar could easily have been carved onto a much thinner piece of stone (the Calendar Stone itself is over 3 feet in total thickness with a diameter of nearly 12 feet). These dimensions, combined with the intricacy of the carving, suggest a purpose beyond simple

astronomical timekeeping. A strong similarity to two known sacrificial stones, the aforementioned Tizoc Stone and the Coyolxauhqui Stone (discussed below), has led some scholars to conclude that the Calendar Stone may also have acted in some capacity as an altar for sacrifices to the Aztec gods. Since little new data is likely to be acquired on the stone so long after its excavation, it is very possible that its exact purpose will never be known with complete certainty.

Ceremonial Tecpatl- Along with the Aztec Calendar Stone, one other specific artifact has come to be widely associated, even among the general public, with the Aztec civilization. This artifact is a famous example of a ceremonial knife, known as a *tecpatl,* which currently resides in the British Museum. The knife features a chalcedony blade with a handle made of cedro and decorated with shell and semi-precious stone inlays. The handle, which is highly decorated, takes the form of a crouched warrior who appears to be holding the blade.

This knife has frequently been misidentified as a blade that would have been used to cut through the rib cages of sacrificial victims in order to remove the heart. However, contemporary analysis suggests that though the blade could probably have sufficed for such a purpose, the knife itself is not constructed well enough for such heavy work. The handle and blade are too loosely attached to each other to be effective in cutting through bone, making it more likely that the blade served a purely decorative or ceremonial purpose.

Templo Mayor and Sacred Precinct- When Tenochtitlan was destroyed, the early stages of modern Mexico City were effectively built atop its ruins. The Templo Mayor and its surroundings, likewise, found themselves buried under the streets, buildings and plazas of the modern city. The result of this fact was intriguing in that scholars always knew more or less where the temple was from accounts dating back to the early founding of Mexico City, but had little ability or incentive to excavate thanks to the disruption that digging would cause. As such, the Templo Mayor and its sacred precinct have not been excavated collectively as a comprehensive archaeological site, but rather in a series of piecework excavations undertaken at different times throughout the 20th century.

The survival of the Templo Mayor as an archaeological site can largely be attributed to its many levels of construction. Though the Spaniards mostly destroyed the final version of the temple and used its stones in their own construction projects, the levels that lay beneath remained relatively undisturbed. Because of this, modern archaeologists have been able to dig down through the various levels that remained and see the development of the temple from its earliest days through its later grandeur. Because of its layers representing the reigns of different rulers throughout Aztec history, the Templo Mayor is also a good indicator for showing how Aztec building and architectural practices developed over time.

Among the most famous finds associated with the Templo Mayor site

is a stone disk that once lay at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli. The disk depicts the dismembered body of Coyolxauhqui, the sister of Huitzilopochtli who was killed by the sun god himself. The stone was accidentally stumbled upon in February of 1978 by a group of electrical workers who had dug a trench in the area where the temple was known to have been located. Though excavations in the sacred precinct that surrounded the Templo Mayor had occurred up to that point, the exact location of the temple itself had never been pinpointed. With the discovery of the Coyolxauhqui Stone, however, the greatest temple of Tenochtitlan was finally identified and real excavations could begin. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, archaeologists worked diligently to uncover and properly categorize the many different levels of the temple that remained at the site.

Illustration 20: The Coyolxauhqui Stone, arguably one of the finest examples of Aztec stone work ever found.

Today, the Aztec temple can once again be seen as the incredible structure that it truly was, an amazing survivor of the utter destruction brought upon Tenochtitlan by the Spaniards. Many of the shrines, altars, storage rooms and other elements have been successfully identified, giving researchers a good idea of the methods of worship practiced by the Aztec priests. Also critical in giving insight

into the religious practices of the Aztecs have been many finds of various offerings in and around the temple that act as some of the last material evidence of the specific rites of the pre-Columbian priests.

Malinalco- The archaeological site of Malinalco, like many throughout the Aztec Empire, did not have its earliest roots in habitation by the Mexica or one of the Nahua groups closely associated with them. The site's origins may stretch back well into the Classical Era of Mesoamerican history, but excavations of the site so far have not yielded any conclusive artifacts that identify the founders or their time frame. What is known is that the site, which is located in the Toluca Valley, was incorporated into the Aztec Empire during the reign of Axayacatl, after which it became a regional center of Aztec political and military influence.

The main temple at Malinalco, designated Structure I, is an typical temple structure (see description in next paragraph) that seems to have been used by the Eagle and Jaguar warrior groups to perform various rites and rituals, possibly including initiations of new members into the groups. A sculpture group inside this temple is among the most completely preserved at any Aztec site, as Malinalco was not subject to the same degree of ravaging at the hands of the Spanish as Tenochtitlan. A sacrificial altar inside the temple also suggests that the rites of the Jaguar and Eagle warrior groups, unsurprisingly given their Aztec background, involved ritual human sacrifice in some way.

Illustration 21: The temple of Malinalco, with a new roof added in modern times.

The temple at Malinalco is rather unusual in terms of its construction in that it is carved into bedrock in the side of a hill, rather than built on open ground from stones quarried and carried to the site. Though not typical of Aztec construction methods, this built-in type of construction has allowed the temple to survive in an exquisite state of preservation, much like other temples and structures carved into solid bedrock around the world.

Several other temples and other structures also remain at the Malinalco complex. Structure II, for example, is a much more typical flat-topped pyramidal platform, atop which a temple or shrine almost certainly would have been located. Structure II, though today restored to its former condition, fell into ruins during the time between the fall

of the Aztec Empire and the beginnings of archaeological work at the site. Another key structure at the site, designated Structure IV, has led some researchers to the conclusion that the Malinalco site may have acted as a type of solar observatory. Its orientation, in relation to other temples and structures at Malinalco, seems to have been designed to catch the sun at key points along the Aztec solar calendar, which lasted for cycles of 260 days. Further observation of buildings at the site suggests that many of them may have been laid out so as to create an accurate solar observatory that would track the sun throughout this cycle. Despite its apparent complexity, the archaeological site at Malinalco is incomplete, having been abandoned during construction in 1521 because of the Spanish invasion, a testament to the fact that the Aztec Empire was still building and expanding when it encountered its European overthrowers.

The site, which is a mere 70 miles south of Mexico City itself, remained undiscovered by modern archaeologists until 1933, and the first real survey did not occur until 1935. Noted Mexican archaeologist Jose Peyon oversaw the early work, which would eventually lead to the reconstruction of the ruined buildings and continued study of today. Peyon, noted for his extensive researches into various Aztec and Totonac sites, would not stay at Malinalco long before moving along to explore and survey other sites, but would lay the groundwork for thorough investigation by other archaeological researchers that continued throughout much of the 20th century.

Tlatelolco- As the smaller and less powerful sister city of Tenochtitlan, the importance of Tlatelolco is often overlooked in the popular mind. However, this city was long the second most powerful in the entirety of the Aztec Empire and played a key role as the empire's single greatest hub of trade and commercial activity. Though the site is less well-known than its counterpart a stone's throw to the south, it has yielded many important findings, especially in the past few years.

Among the most important finds in what would have once been Tlatelolco is a pyramid that acted as the city's main temple, analogous to the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan. This pyramid may illustrate one of the common pitfalls of establishing historical reality, which is the often inaccurate nature of ancient sources. Generally, Aztec historical sources have it that Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco were founded at almost exactly the same time. The pyramid of Tlatelolco, however, has yielded finds that have been dated to a time slightly earlier than any finds at Tenochtitlan, indicating that the city of Tlatelolco may in fact have predated the eventual Aztec capital. If such is the case, it may even be that Tenochtitlan stood in the shadow of Tlatelolco during the early years of its existence, although there can be very little doubt that it took a dominant role fairly early on in its history.

Tlatelolco has also recently yielded the fascinating find of a mass burial thought to date from the time of the Spanish invasion. The find was made when excavating a part of the Tlatelolco site in 2008 that

was believed to have consisted of state homes for members of the elite military units. Intriguingly, though the bones of the individuals found in the burial exhibit physiological traits associated with the native population, the bones are arranged in a manner that suggests European burial practices, including the characteristic Christian burial custom of the crossing of the arms over the chest. Two interpretations have been assigned to this find. The first is that the burial represents a window of time immediately after the first stages of the Christianization of the Aztecs, accounting for the atypical burial practices. The other, probably more likely, scenario is that the individuals found at the Tlatelolco mass burial were actually buried by Spaniards, who would doubtlessly have followed the burial customs of their own people, even when burying native Aztecs.

El Tepozteco- Centered in what the Aztec would have known as the city-state of Tepoztlan is a small but intriguing archaeological site from the late 15th through early 16th centuries. The most prominent feature of the site is a small temple known as *el Tepozteco*, which has come to be the name used for the entire site. This name, in turn, is derived from a Spanish interpretation of the Nuhua name Tepoztecatl, the Aztec god associated with the alcoholic beverage *pulque*.

Within the temple itself, Aztec glyphs have been found that associate the temple with the ruler Ahuitzotl. A separate set of glyphs indicate a calendar date, specifically the year in which Ahuitzotl died (1502). While some have suggested that this means that the temple's

construction was begun during the final year of this emperor's reign, it is more likely that significant renovation was done to an older temple in honor of the deceased emperor. Certainly, had the temple been started in the last year of Ahuitzotl's reign, the majority of the work and the completion of the temple would have occurred under the rule of Moctezuma II, his immediate successor. Thus, it would be more likely that the stones bearing these glyphs, which almost certainly would have been carved during the finishing stages of the temple, would bear the name and date from the reign of Moctezuma II if they were meant to convey credit for the building of the temple.

Section Eleven

Aztec Writing

Because of the very limited amount of material that is available, the Aztec written language is sometimes ignored in works aimed at a non-academic audience. However, the value of the written material that is extant is sufficient that it warrants at least a brief overview in any history that wishes to call itself truly complete.

The Aztec Nahuatl writing system is an unusual one, as it seems to have been a written language in a middle stage of development

between entirely pictorial representation of words and ideas and a more complete writing system making use of phonetic symbols and logograms (refined symbols that convey specific and often complex ideas). As such, the existing samples of Nahuatl writing are a strange mixture of these different systems, both of which seem to have been in use to varying degrees contemporary with each other.

The typical primary usage of written Nahuatl seems to have been to convey dates, names (both personal and place) and numerical values. Lengthy texts, such as the historical texts that are readily found among the key writings of most civilizations, seem to have been conveyed more pictorially than by writing. Again, however, it should be noted that pictorial representations in Nahuatl texts could be read very specifically, forming a type of glyph system. These pictorial glyphs, with the proper knowledge of their meaning, could be used to convey ideas as complex as more standard written language systems, though the format would still have been cumbersome compared to a phonetic or more simplified symbol-based system.

In addition to the pictorial glyphs, written Nahuatl also does include a phonetic system based on its logograms. These logograms, when used for their phonetic values, adhere to a linguistic concept called the Rebus Principle. Simply stated, the Rebus Principle posits that a symbol or word bearing a certain phonetic value in any given language can be used to represent only that phonetic value, with the actual common meaning ignored. In our own language, a simple

example of this principle would be the use of the word “saw” (as in an instrument for cutting wood) to represent the concept of having looked upon something (communicated in the past tense). Pictographically, this could be simplified to an image of a common tool for cutting wood to communicate the idea of having seen something. While the Rebus Principle is incredibly useful for creating phonetic systems from existing symbols, it does require a degree of interpretation and can add a confusing element to any text.

Precisely why Aztec took on this varied and comparatively primitive form is something of a mystery. Certainly, other writing systems extant in Central America at the time were much more refined and enabled their users to write longer texts that used symbols more efficiently. Written Mayan, for example, uses highly stylized logograms to convey much longer and more complete texts that, in Nahuatl, would have been represented mostly pictorially. This, along with the linguistic connection between the Nahuatl language and various Native American languages of the American southwest mentioned in the first section, may point again to the region of northern Mexico or the Southwestern United States as the origin of the Mexica, as pictographs can commonly be found as rock art in these areas.

Appendixes

Appendix A

List and Description of Major Aztec Gods and Goddesses

In order to accompany the previous discussion of Aztec religious belief and practice and the many mentions of various Aztec deities throughout this short history, we will now here embark on an expanded exploration of the most important gods and goddesses of the Aztec pantheon. It should be understood clearly that each of the deities incorporated here has associated with him or her a complex and intricate mythology, of which the following survey will convey only the most critical and key points.

Huitzilopochtli- To the extent that any one god may be called the most important god of Aztec religion, Huitzilopochtli must almost certainly be given that credit. As the god embodying the Fifth Sun, the period in which the Aztecs believed modern humans live, Huitzilopochtli was the sustainer of all life on Earth. He was also the patron god of the Aztecs, who guided them to the Valley of Mexico and gave them the sign to indicate where they should settle. Although the mythology around Huitzilopochtli, especially in the Five Suns

myth, clearly designates him as a supernatural being, some scholars have theorized that he may have originated as a deified early leader of the Aztecs either before or during their period of migration southward. This interpretation of Huitzilopochtli derives from the Aztec myth of the great migration, which Huitzilopochtli is said to have personally sent them on. Thus, like some other gods from around the world, this chief god of the Aztecs may, in fact, have begun as a greatly revered elder leader from a particularly important time in the history of the Aztec people.

Illustration 22: Huitzilopochtli

Huitzilopochtli's importance as the sun god was doubled by his role

as the chief god of war, a key part of Aztec life and society. War, to the Aztecs, was far more than an activity conducted for strategic military or political gain, as most modern societies view it. Instead, it was an integral part of Aztec society, religion and even economics. Without consistent conflict with their neighbors, Aztec warriors lost their opportunity to climb the social ladder into the martial elite, priests were deprived of their main source of sacrifices and the nobility could not add bring in new tributary states to increase the flow of wealth from the provinces. Because of the importance attached to warfare in the Aztec society, Huitzilopochtli was almost as revered for his role as a war god as for his role as the sun god. Much as the sun sustained life on Earth, warfare sustained and expanded the Aztec Empire, and in both roles Huitzilopochtli was key.

Tezcatlipoca- For the fearsome nature of the many Aztec gods, few could be said to rival Tezcatlipoca, the god of darkness, magic and destruction. Having been active in the various destructions of mankind and the Earth before the time of the Fifth Sun, Tezcatlipoca was seen as a god who had to be kept appeased, as his wrath could easily bring about the end of man once more. However, his sinister nature was counterpointed by such aspects as has divine representation of beauty. Frequently, Aztec gods could have dualistic natures that seem to have little in common.

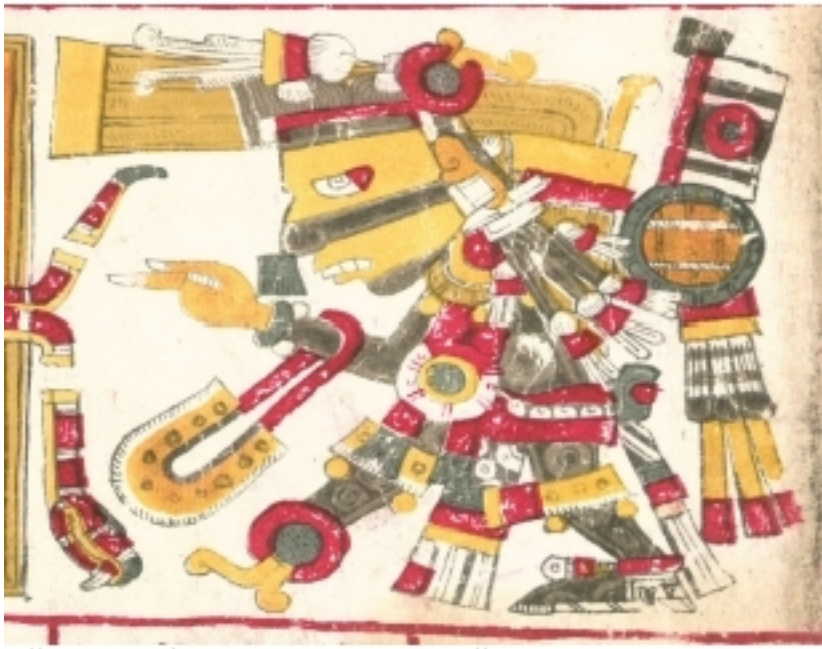

Illustration 23: Tezcatlipoca

The origins of the worship of Tezcatlipoca almost certainly predate the Aztec arrival in the Valley of Mexico, as very similar deities can be found in the religious traditions of other Mesoamerican groups going back well into the Classical Period. It is even possible that the Olmec, the first major civilization in Mesoamerica, had an analogous god to Tezcatlipoca who was then passed down through Mayan and Toltec traditions to the migrating Aztec. Here again, we see that Aztec culture, though unique in some ways, drew heavily on the legacies of the great civilizations that had predated it in its immediate vicinity.

Quetzalcoatl- Easily the most recognized of the Mesoamerican deities today, Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, was also one of the most universal in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. In the Aztec pantheon, Quetzalcoatl was the primary sky god, associated with wind and air (except for hurricanes and vicious storms, which seem to have been the purview of Tezcatlipoca). Quetzalcoatl was also seen as a god of creation and wisdom, especially for his role in resurrecting the human race for the final time at the outset of the Fifth Sun.

Illustration 24: Quetzalcoatl

Worship of feathered serpent gods almost identical to Quetzalcoatl can be found throughout many Mesoamerican civilizations. The earliest known group to have worshiped this god is the enigmatic civilization of Teotihuacan, where sculpted depictions of a feathered

snake feature prominently. The Maya also adopted this god, calling him Kukulkan. In the guise of Kukulkan, the feathered serpent god of Mesoamerica has even managed to survive the long process of Western cultural integration in southern Mexico, where a feathered serpent is still a popular character in various tales of indigenous folklore.

Xipe Totec- Xipe Totec stands out in all of human history as one of the gods imagined by the human race whose worship took the strangest form. As the god of the cycles of death and rebirth and the closely associated concept of the change of the seasons in agriculture, Xipe Totec was an important god for farmers in the Aztec Empire. This representation of rebirth and renewal, however, led to Xipe Totec being depicted wearing flayed human skin, a symbol of new flesh. For this reason,, ceremonies dedicated to Xipe Totec frequently involved the skinning of sacrificial victims, with priests often going so far as to wear the skin of the victim during the special festival dates dedicated to the god of agriculture. Despite being heavily associated with Xipe Totec, whose name literally means “Flayed Lord,” the practice of flaying a victim and wearing his or her skin was not exclusive to the worship of this particular god.

Illustration 25: Xipe Totec. As always, the god is shown wearing flayed human skin.

Mictlantecuhtli- The Aztec god of death and the underworld, Mictlantecuhtli was traditionally depicted as a partially skeletal human, almost always with a skull barren of flesh for a head. Mictlantecuhtli resided in the Aztec underworld, which was known as Mictlan. As the ruler of the underworld and the god personifying death, Mictlantecuhtli was viewed with both fear and reverence by the Aztecs, who venerated death even though their underworld was a

fearsome place which only those who died of specific unnatural causes would escape. Mictlantecuhtli and his bride, Mictecacihuatl, have been suggested as the early basis for the cult of Santa Muerte, an unusual mixture of Spanish Catholic traditions and pre-Columbian death worship that arose out of the meeting of the two cultures and still has adherents in some parts of Mexico to this day.

Tlaloc- Just as Xipe Totec and Huitzilopochtli were absolutely necessary deities to the Aztec for controlling agricultural cycles and the sun, respectively, Tlaloc was essential for his control over the rains that caused crops to grow. The importance of the rains as an element of agricultural life is acknowledged in many representations of Tlaloc, which show him with ears of corn. Tlaloc, like many of the Aztec gods, appears to have had his origins in earlier traditions, as both the Maya and the Teotihuacan civilization seem to have worshiped a very similar god to Tlaloc. Given the importance that is assigned to rain gods in most early religions, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Aztec, Mayan and Teotihuacan forms of Tlaloc may all have their roots in an Olmec or even pre-Olmec tradition.

Chalchiuhtlicue- The female counterpart of Tlaloc (alternatively described as his sister or wife in different versions of Aztec mythology), Chalchiuhtlicue was a key goddess associated with bodies of water such as rivers, lakes and even oceans. This role as a water goddess also led to her association with fertility and childbirth, making Chalchiuhtlicue the closest analog to the more familiar Near

Eastern mother goddesses in Aztec religion (though any parallels drawn between New World and Old World religious systems should be stated to be, at best, only very loose approximations).

Coatlicue- Though Chalchiuhtlicue was the mother goddess of Aztec religion, another aspect of traditional mother goddesses, that of the primeval Earth mother, is filled in the Aztec pantheon by another goddess, Coatlicue. In some alternative versions of the Aztec creation mythology to the Five Suns myth, Coatlicue is portrayed as the mother of many of the lower gods and goddesses, including Huitzilopochtli. Iconography portraying Coatlicue is generally rich in snake motifs, including the common inclusion of a skirt made of snakes being worn by this goddess.

Tlazolteotl- There is perhaps no deity in which the common Aztec religious theme of duality is so thoroughly embodied as the goddess Tlazolteotl. In one manner, she was seen as the goddess of unclean things, transgressions against the gods and immoral activities. In her other capacity, however, she was also the goddess of purification of these things, restoring goodness and cleanliness to those who acted immorally. Particularly associated with this goddess were acts of sexual immorality, which Aztec culture frowned heavily upon. Venereal diseases were sometimes attributed to Tlazolteotl as punishments for those who acted impulsively upon lust. In a striking analog to the Catholic religion that would eventually be foisted upon the Aztecs with the coming of the Spanish under Cortes, those who

had committed transgressions would sometimes offer up confessions of their guilt to the priests and priestesses of Tlazolteotl, an act that was believed to appeal to the goddess and incline her to grant forgiveness and purification.

Huehueteotl- The god of fire, time and aging to whom the Ceremony of the New Fire was dedicated at the end of every 52 year calendar cycles, Huehueteotl was seen by the Aztecs as the god who kept time in harmony and balance. This keeping of time was symbolized in depictions of Huehueteotl by showing him as a wizened and ancient man. Another deity, Xiutecuhtli, bears very similar attributes and is depicted as a young and vigorous man, leading many to the conclusion that the two are not in fact separate deities at all but simply different aspects of the same being assigned specific names depending on what aspect is being portrayed. Huehueteotl may be one of the earliest gods of the Aztec pantheon, but was probably not added until their arrival in the Valley of Mexico. Depictions of a very similar god have been found at the archaeological site of Cuicuilco, thought to have been the earliest major city-state in the Valley of Mexico. If this is indeed an early precursor of Huehueteotl, it would demonstrate that the Aztec god of time and fire had been worshiped on the shores of Lake Texcoco for more than 1,500 years before the Mexica arrived.

Appendix B

Major Aztec and Spanish Codices

Though there have been many great archaeological finds that have contributed to the knowledge modern historians have of the Aztec Empire and its people, much of what is known comes from various codices produced by the Aztec themselves or, more commonly, their Spanish conquerors. Below will be listed brief descriptions of the content and importance of some of the more well-known of these works. It should be noted that, at one time, many more codices of indigenous Aztec origin existed. However, many of these were destroyed by the Aztec rulers themselves, with other certainly having been lost to history after the Spanish invasion.

Florentine Codex- Probably the best known of the many codices dealing with the Aztecs, their history and their civilization, the Florentine Codex was compiled over the course of more than four decades by Bernardino de Sahugan. Sahugan, as a friar of the Franciscan order, certainly would have gone into the creation of the Florentine Codex at the marked disadvantage of viewing the very culturally different Aztec civilization through a Western eye. However, no fault or error can possibly be assigned to Sahugan for lack of diligence or rigor in attempting to understand and accurately and objectively convey the characteristics of the Aztec civilization.

The content of the Florentine Codex deals with many different aspects of Aztec life across 12 individual books. Topics from history to everyday life in the empire to the gods and their proper methods of worship and devotion are discussed, with much of the information gathered from native Nahua individuals with whom Sahugan formed close relationships in order to gain the most possible information. Such is the extent of Sahugan's dedication in creating the work that it was even written in the native Nahautl language. Today, the Florentine Codex is one of the most complete sources for information about the state of the Aztec civilization at the time of the Spanish conquest and much of its history leading up to that point. The work also stands as a milestone in the area of cultural anthropology, being one of the earliest true studies of a people undertaken with such care and diligence.

Aubin Codex- The Aubin Codex is a work compiled largely to convey the history of the Aztecs as a people, beginning with their semi-mythical departure from Aztlan and carrying on through the Spanish arrival and the earliest days of the colonial period. The codex probably dates from the later half of the 16th century, though the exact time of its creation is not known. In its discussion of the history of the Aztec, the Aubin Codex helps to corroborate many of the statements of the Florentine Codex, though it is nowhere near as comprehensive a work as its more famous counterpart.

Borgia Codex- The Borgia Codex, like a handful of others, is

considered to be an “authentic” Aztec codex, in that it was probably based on earlier works that predated the Spanish invasion, even though none of these pre-conquest copies survive. This codex has dual purposes as an astronomical text, dealing with the various calendar dates and special festivals, and as a pictorial manuscript on Aztec divination practices. It was likely meant to be exclusively used and understood by the priesthood, members of which would have been trained to understand its complex and often enigmatic symbology. The Borgia Codex also contains depictions of many of the Aztec gods (some of which you may find as illustrations in the preceding appendix). This codex takes its modern name from the church official in whose library it eventually came to reside, a relation of the more well-known members of the Borgia family.

Codex Mendoza- Though it was created slightly after the onset of the Spanish colonial period in Mexico, the Codex Mendoza is, for all intents and purposes, a traditional Aztec codex. The work takes the form of a history of the Mexica from the time of their arrival in the Valley of Mexico until the fall of the Aztec Empire. Much like the Aubin Codex, the Codex Mendoza is an important document for its provision of corroborating accounts to other versions of the same history. Different sections of the codex depict the early history of the Aztecs and of Tenochtitlan, the creation of the empire and the more day-to-day aspects of life within the Aztec Empire. The codex is also interesting for its pictorial depiction of the palace of Moctezuma II, described in such grandeur in other sources. Though somewhat crude

in its artistic execution, the image of the palace in the Codex Mendoza is likely quite accurate, being that the codex was compiled at a time when many people still living in and around the former city of Tenochtitlan would have seen the palace first hand at the height of its glory.

Codex Borbonicus- Though no truly original Aztec codices survive today, the Codex Borbonicus is believed to be the closest parallel. Stylistically, the Codex Borbonicus shows little European influence. However, it is probably a copy made from one of the original codices early on in the colonial period. Nevertheless, the Codex Borbonicus remains as one of the most important documents from contemporary Aztec sources. Like the Borgia Codex, the Codex Borbonicus is a primarily religious and astronomical document, concerned with the keeping of time in the calendar and the use of astrology in divination. Included in the Codex Borbonicus are some of the best illustrations of the specific religious rituals of the Aztec priests still in existence, including a graphic depiction of the New Fire ceremony that occurred at the end of the Aztec calendar cycle.

Codex Xolotl- Another key historical codex is the Codex Xolotl, which details earlier parts of the history of the Valley of Mexico. Interestingly, the historical account is more centered on Texcoco than Tenochtitlan, giving modern historians a glimpse into the historical background of one of the other major cities in the immediate vicinity.

Lost Codices- Before moving on from the topic of the Aztec codices, it is at least as important to take stock of what has been lost as to describe what has survived. Many of the older historical codices are believed to have been destroyed at the hands of the Aztec emperors themselves around the time of the establishment of the Triple Alliance and the expansion of the Aztec Empire, probably in order to rewrite a version of historical events that more favored the power of the Aztec state. It is entirely possible that the tale of the journey from Aztlan to the Valley of Mexico directed by Huitzilopochtli was a part of this rewriting, conferring on the Aztecs a type of divine right to inhabit and rule central Mexico. Since all Aztec historical accounts we have today come from a later time period, it will likely never be known what was kept and what was dispensed with when the emperors rewrote the history of their people.

As much as was probably lost when the Aztecs themselves set about changing their history, it is nothing compared to the amount of information destroyed by the Spanish during the colonial period. Owing to the vigorous spirit of Catholic zeal in Spain at the time, many of the manuscripts of the Aztec are known to have been destroyed for their pagan content, which some Spaniards went so far as to suggest was inspired by the devil himself (Mictlantecuhtli, in particular, was sometimes identified with Lucifer). Because the priests were the keepers of knowledge in Aztec society, like many others, the codices containing scientific and medical knowledge also would have contained religious iconography. For this reason, when the Spanish set

about the burning of what they considered to be demonic manuscripts, much of the knowledge and history of the Aztec civilization was lost. Sadly, this would be far from an isolated incident. Mayan and Mixtec codices were also frequent victims of this religiously driven practice. How many codices were destroyed and what they contained no one will ever know, but it is safe to say that the Spanish invaders who took part in the destruction forever deprived the scholarly community of massive amounts of data regarding the great Mesoamerican civilizations they had encountered.

Appendix C

Peoples Surrounding the Aztec

Any reader who has reached this point in this short history will certainly have recognized that Mesoamerica at the time of the Aztec Empire was a complex region made up of many different cultural and political entities. Following will be brief descriptions of some of the more influential of the other peoples of Post-Classical Mesoamerica with whom the Aztecs traded and did battle.

Mixtec- One of the most powerful civilizations in Mexico besides the Aztec themselves were the Mixtec, a group of individual tribes that lived to the southeast of the Aztec heartland in the Valley of Mexico.

The Mixtec peoples (much like the Aztec, the broader Mixtec group was made up of more than one individual tribe) seem to have had extensive presence in southern Mexico throughout much of the Classical and Post-Classical eras of Mesoamerican history. Though they did not command the same degree of military or political might as the Aztec civilization, the Mixtec states were prosperous and grew wealthy from regional trade, a fact that made them extremely tempting targets for the Aztec Empire during its expansion.

The Mixtec, at one time, may have had the opportunity to become a powerful empire in their own right. During the 11th century, prior to the Aztec arrival in the Valley of Mexico, a powerful leader named Iya Nacuaa Teyusi Nana (more commonly called simply by his name's English translation, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw) successfully united most of the Mixtec kingdoms into a single entity. At this time, however, the dominant force in Mexico was still the Toltec Empire, which formed a close relationship with the Mixtec tribes. Had the Mixtec, like the Aztec, arisen in the power vacuum left by the fall of the Toltec, there is every possibility that they would have become a power to be reckoned with throughout Mesoamerica. As history played out, their importance was still great within the context of the Aztec Empire.

Zapotec- Bordering the Mixtec kingdoms in the south were the lands held by the Zapotec peoples. Like the Mixtec, the Zapotec greatly predate the arrival of the Aztec at Texcoco. In the case of the Zapotec, archaeological finds in the modern Mexican state of Oaxaca

indicate that the Zapotec may have been active in the area as early as 2,700 years ago. Like the Mixtec, the Zapotec had reached their height earlier in Mesoamerican history. In the case of the Zapotec, this height had come between about 100 BCE and 200 CE, when the Zapotec had achieved a type of regional hegemonic rule over their immediate vicinity. Though they would continue to hold these lands well into the era of Toltec expansion, the Zapotec would not be widely incorporated into the Toltec Empire.

Purepecha (Tarsacans)- The Purepacha were one of the most powerful groups ever to oppose the Aztec Empire's expansion, occupying an area to the east of the Valley of Mexico which constituted a state second only in territory and power to the Aztec Empire itself. War between the Aztec and the Purepecha Empire was a fairly frequent occurrence, though no side ever truly gained the upper hand of the other. The result was a long-lasting stalemate between two empires that were each too powerful to be successfully subjugated by the other. The Purepecha Empire was centered around its capital at Tzintzuntzan, a massive religious center on the shores of Lake Patzcuaro. Though Tzintzuntzan would eventually be partially destroyed and abandoned, the city has come back to light in the modern era as a remarkable archaeological site. The Purepecha gave themselves over to Spanish rule much more peacefully than the Aztec, and a modern city was not built on the ruins of the Purepecha capital. As such, the site has not been as disturbed by intentional destruction and modern building as has the former site of Tenochtitlan.

Maya- Probably the best known of all Mesoamerican civilizations, the Maya were still very much extant when the Aztec Empire arose from the area surrounding Lake Texcoco. Though they had never been brought together to form an empire, the Maya city-states had been the dominating force throughout southern Mexico, the Yucatan Peninsula and Guatemala throughout much of Mesoamerican history, especially in the Classical Period. These city-states, though diminished from their previous power in the region, were still very influential, particularly in trade, within Mexico at the time of the Aztec Empire.

Huastec- The Huastec civilization was a branching off of the aforementioned Mayan civilization that is believed to have migrated northward from the Maya homelands sometime around the end of the decline of Mayan civilization at the end of the Mesoamerican Classical Period. Unfortunately, the Huastec civilization has remained somewhat enigmatic, partially because it covered a smaller region than many of its contemporaries and so left fewer archaeological sites for study and partially because of the focus traditionally directed by historians and archaeologists toward the more major Aztec, Mixtec and Zapotec civilizations that existed nearby in the same time frame.

One major distinguishing feature of the Huastec has, however, become clear to modern researchers. Unlike almost any other group in Mesoamerica, the Huastec appear to have had a knowledge of metallurgy that extended beyond decorative work with gold and silver

and into more functional metalwork with bronze. Metallurgy in Mesoamerica appears to have developed farther to the west, in areas that the Aztec did not include in their empire but which would have been accessible through trade routes. Through this network, the Huastec learned and developed a certain degree of proficiency with bronze smithing, a technology that was never widely adopted by the Aztec. At the time of the Spanish invasion, the Huastec would have been one of only a handful of peoples throughout Central and South America with the ability to create bronze objects.

Totonac- Though only one among the many groups that were conquered by the Aztec Empire during its years of expansion, the Totonac would play a key role in its destruction. When Cortes landed at Veracruz, his proximity to traditional Totonac territory dictated that the Totonac would be one of the very first groups he and his men encountered. Later, the Totonacs would be well represented in the force with which Cortes moved against Tenochtitlan. The Totonac people are also among the possible candidates for the civilization that built Teotihuacan, though little beyond circumstantial evidence has ever been uncovered that would point directly to this conclusion.

Chichimec- Unlike other groups here listed, the Chichimec were not a single people. Rather, the word “Chichimec” is used to describe any of a large number of nomadic and semi-nomadic peoples that lived throughout northern and central Mexico during the Post-

Classical period of Mesoamerican history. The Chichimec were widely regarded as uncivilized by both the native Mesoamerican groups that had already undergone a period of urbanization and by the Spanish conquerors of Mexico, who would have to fight an extended series of wars with various nomadic Chichimec groups. It should be noted, however, that various Chichimec groups would later become great urbanized powers. The Toltec, for example, are believed to have been one of the groups that, in their earliest days, would have been regarded as belonging to the Chichimec groups. The Aztec, too, would have fit the description of Chichimec in their pre-urban migrational period.

Other Nahua Groups- Though the Mexica themselves were the group that would ultimately come to be known alternatively as the Aztec, there were many other closely related Nahua groups throughout central Mexico, nearly all of which are generally thought to have actually arrived before the migration of the Mexica. Prominent Nahua groups in Mexico besides the Mexica themselves included the Tlaxcala and the Tepanec, both of which at different times in Aztec history had extensive dealings with Tenochtitlan. The various Nahua groups of the areas surrounding Lake Texcoco formed an integral part of the Aztec homeland, already speaking the same language and adhering to the same cultural traditions as the Aztec themselves.

Appendix D

Selected Words from the Nahuatl Language

Though the dialects varied slightly from region to region, the Nahuatl language became something of a new world *lingua franca* in the Aztec Empire, as it was the language spoken by the ruling classes from Tenochtitlan as well as by many regional officials. Following will be several words selected from the Nahuatl language, along with their English equivalents.

Atlepetl- The Nahuatl word used to describe any settlement. Could be applied to either a small village or even a large city-state.

Acalli- Boat. Until the arrival of the Spaniards, this word would have been applied exclusively to the canoes that were widely used by Mesoamerican group.

Teopan- A temple complex, composed of the main temple and all other adjacent buildings.

Tletl- More literally "heat," but could be used to denote a fire.

Atl- Water. Like "*Tletl"* can have multiple related meanings, including being the word used to describe various bodies of water.

Itztli- Knife, specifically one made from obsidian.

Tetl- Stone, rock or boulder.

Pochtecatl- A merchant or long-distance commercial trader.

Amoxtli- Book, more specifically the codex variety of books that were common in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.

Maitl- Human arm or hand.

Miquiliztli- Death

Citlalin- Word for a star, also used as a modifier to describe other astronomical bodies.

Molini- Run

Appendix E

Short Bibliography of Recommended Further Reading

It is the hope of the author that some readers of this short historical work will be inspired to pursue further studies of the Aztec and their

remarkable civilization. For those who do choose to delve farther into the history, culture and context of the Aztec, the following works will be of invaluable assistance and come highly recommended.

Brumfiel, Elizabeth & Feinman, Gary. (2008). The Aztec World. Abrams. New York, New York.

*Sahagun, Bernardino. (c. late 16th century). Florentine Codex. (*note: several excellent online versions available as partial and complete texts, many translated into English for ease of access).

Davies, Nigel. (1980). The Aztecs. University of Oklahoma Press. Norman, Oklahoma.

Coe, Michael & Koontz, Rex. (2013). Mexico (7th edition). Thames & Hudson. New York, New York.

Phillips, Charles. (2009). Aztec & Maya. Anness. Leicester, England.

Townsend, Richard. (2000). The Aztecs. Thames & Hudson. New York, New York.

Conclusion and a Brief Word From the

Author

Though the Aztec Empire and the civilization that created it were almost certainly cut short in their prime by the invasion of the Spanish, there can be little question as to the influence that the Aztec had on Mesoamerica in their own time. The culture, traditions, and political power of the Aztec Empire were projected over a massive territory and gradually shaped the other civilizations that existed around it. This influence, though stunted by Cortes and the *conquistadors*, cannot even truly be said to have ended with the Spanish taking of Mexico. Indeed, elements of the cultural traditions, folklore and language of the Aztecs can still be seen throughout much of modern Mexico, a testament to the once-powerful empire that dominated the region nearly half a millennium ago.

Though the Aztec have been the subject of research by scholars in every century since their downfall, much research is ongoing, and new facts and uncovered by archaeologists and historians with every passing year. Improvements in technology, the methodologies of field archaeology and conservation have allowed more to be learned from the sites that had long been known to have an association with the Aztec Empire, while greater willingness on the part of modern cities to allow archaeological digs has resulted in the discovery and more complete exploration of many new sites. Certainly, there is still much to learn about the Aztec people and their ways of life, and the years to

come promise to be a fascinating time in the research of this incredible civilization.

In closing, I would like to thank you as always for having selected and read *The Aztec: The Last Great Civilization of Mesoamerica.* It is my hope that you have found it both enlightening and entertaining, and that it will lay the groundwork for whatever further study you may personally undertake of the Aztec and the place and time in which they lived. If you enjoyed it, you may also enjoy some of my other short histories, which may be found below:

The Hittites: The Lost Empire of the Ancient World

The Sumerians: History's First Recorded Civilization

Sparta: The Warrior State of Ancient Greece

The Pyramids: Ancient Egypt's Most Iconic Monuments

The Achaemenid Empire: The First Great Persian Empire

The Celts: The Enigmatic Peoples of Iron Age Europe

You can also follow my Author Page on Amazon to be notified when my future short histories are released by following the link below and clicking the yellow “Follow” button on the page.

My Author Page

Finally, I would like to invite you to return to the page from which you purchased this book and leave an honest review of your thoughts

and impressions of it. This kind of feedback is sincerely appreciated, as it helps me to consistently improve my works to better meet the expectations of my audience. For those of you who have the time and inclination to leave an honest review, I would like to convey my thanks in advance.

In closing, I would just like to thank all of my readers once again. Since beginning my series of short and economical histories of the ancient world, I have been consistently surprised by the enthusiasm and positive reception that they have received.

Again, thank you,

Duncan Ryan

Image Notes

All images used herein are in the Public Domain or otherwise licensed for free commercial usage per designation of Wikimedia Commons. The author of this work makes no claim to ownership of any image contained herein. Full attributions and file URLs for all images and illustrations provided below.

Illustration 1: By http://www.geographicus.com/mm5/cartographers/gemelli.txt [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/99/1704_Gemelli_Map_of_the_Aztec_Migration_from_Aztlan_to_Chapultapec_-_Geographicus_-_AztecMigration-gemelli-1704.jpg

Illustration 2: By Karl Weule, †1926 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/

f3/Chinampas.jpg

Illustration 3: Public Domain, source Codex Mendoza (author's life plus 100 years). File URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tenoch.jpg#filelinks

Illustration 4: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL:https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/15/Tezozomoc.jpg

Illustration 5: Public Domain, source Codex Mendoza (author's life plus 100 years). File URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Itzcoatl.jpg

Illustration 6: Public Domain, source Codex Mendoza (author's life plus 100 years). File URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Huehuemoteuczoma_mendoza_(cropped).jpg

Illustration 7: By Infrogmation of New Orleans (Photo by Infrogmation) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b1/TizocStone_DetailHarvardJune07.jpg

Illustration 8: By Brantz Mayer (archive.org) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/46/Ruins_at_Mitla.jpg

Illustration 9: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ca/Moctezuma_Mendoza.jpg

Illustration 10: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7f/Cortes-Hernan-LOC.jpg.

Illustration 11: By User:Gengiskanhg (Photograph taken by me) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b8/Zempoala-06.jpg

Illustration 12: Public Domain, source Primeros Memoriales (author's life plus 100 years). File URL:https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cuitlahuac2.jpg

Illustration 13: By William de Leftwich Dodge [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LastDaysofTenochtitlanB.jpg

Illustration 14: By Thelmadatter (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f9/ViewOneTemploMayor.JPG

Illustration 15: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Cipactli.jpg

Illustration 16: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/53/Codex_Magliabechiano_%28141_cropped%29.jpg

Illustration 17: By The Field Museum Library [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/86/Aztec_Warriors_%28Florentine_Codex%29.jpg

Illustration 18: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Detroit_Photographic_Company_%281008%29.jpg

Illustration 19: By No machine-readable author provided. SeRgioo assumed (based on copyright claims). [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/61/Aztec_calendar_stone.jpg

Illustration 20: By Thelmadatter (Cropped from Image:CoyolxauhquiDisk.JPG.) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e3/CoyolxauhquiDisk_cropped.JPG.

Illustration 21: By Maunus (Own work) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/59/Malinalcotemple1.jpg

Illustration 22: Public Domain, source Codex Telleriano-Remensis. File URL: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Huitzilopochtli_telleriano.jpg

Illustration 23: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/

commons/4/4f/Tezcatlipoca_3.jpg

Illustration 24: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/35/Quetzalcoatl_Ehecatl.jpg

Illustration 25: See page for author [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons. File URL: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/CodexBorbonicus.JPG